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GREEN GRAPES



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GREEN GRAPES

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DOINGS OF A GOD

BY

GERTIE DE S. WENTWORTH-JAMES

AUTHOR OF

"GOLDEN YOUTH," "THE MAN MARKET," ETC.

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1926

LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE, LTD.
8 ESSEX STREET, STRAND, W.C. 2

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W478
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A REMARK

THE average woman thinks too much about herself and things connected with herself, and in consequence acquires a certain condition of morbid introspection, which often leads to dangerous results.

Let her do more and think less. It will be better for her in the end.

G. DE S. W.-J.

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GREEN GRAPES

CHAPTER I

TO DO WITH THE PAST

"THE mistress does put some go into that old fiddle of hers, doesn't she?—makes it sound as though it was saying things that it shouldn't say! Eh? Ha! ha! ha!"

That was the verdict down in the servants' sitting-room when Elsa Johnson-Carr played the violin.

And the verdict showed a certain amount of crude penetration, because there was something about Elsa's playing which would insensibly offend the susceptibilities of any maiden aunt who had never been given the chance of being anything except a maiden aunt.

For Elsa slashed and dashed at the strings, slashed ferociously till sometimes there was a noise like the creaking of heavy furniture being pushed along a polished floor. And sometimes there was a screech like the anguish of a hell-bound soul, and sometimes a wail like the pitiful lament of one who has tried much and failed entirely, and sometimes the quivering call of love waiting to mate with love.

And oh! the ineffable languor and sweetness and longing of that call!—the demand of it, the seducing whisper of it, the promise of it, the suggestion of it! Any man who heard that music must either respond or retreat beyond earshot! No half measure would be possible.

And when she played like that the late Gerald Johnson-Carr's widow would press her lips together as though to show how determined she was to make her fiddle say all that she herself hardly dared to express. For she was

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brutal to that fiddle if it didn't obey her, and she drew together her black eyebrows and set her full scarlet mouth with an intensity of dogged will-power which no violin could withstand.

So, as the fiddle felt her mastery, it obeyed—as anything and anybody will obey relentless mastery!—and said just what she wanted it to say.

And she wanted it to speak of her soul's revolt at almost every existing condition—not just petty discontent or disapproval, but stubborn unceasing revolt at things which she felt so pitifully incapable of altering.

She wanted it to tell how she saw through all of the world that came her way to see through; how, no matter what pretences and shams people might put up, she saw through them all—all—all.

She wanted it to croak away on the G string and give forth laughter at the expense of all those men who carneyed and blarneyed and even invested a certain amount of capital in expenditure likely to impress an affluent widow. (It was that affluence of hers which put in her way so much extra food for cynical observation!)

And on the D string she wanted to rasp out contemptuous condemnation of her own sex and their pitifully absurd make-beliefs—such as pretending that their husbands were faithful, or that their loverless condition was due to choice, not necessity—or that their age was at least eight years more than they announced it to be—or—or—oh! it was at the expense of all these and similarly pathetic little feminine pretences that the D string was commanded to rasp out its derision!

But the A string was permitted to whisper sweeter and more subtle thoughts, and to quiver with potent passion and to thrill with some cherished illusion not invincibly and permanently shattered; while the E string's messages were those which rose to sublime heights and were sent out to reach some destination known only to a human soul which revels in its own frenzied fight to be free.

Yes, there could be no doubt that “the mistress *did* put some go into that old fiddle of hers!” And though it mayn't have been very scholarly “go,” or very technically

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perfect "go," it got where it was meant to get, and did much to relieve the pent-up feelings of the player.

* * * * *

There were times when Elsa Johnson-Carr sat alone and played the fiddle, and while doing so let her thoughts drift back over her entire life, or as much as she could remember of it.

And one particular night in late winter or early spring—the season following the declaration of a blessed Peace—she was in a particularly retrospective mood while the instrument nestling against the creamy smoothness of her neck was made to croon out a soft legato accompaniment to her thoughts.

She was thinking of an incident connected with her early childhood which, although entirely trivial and unimportant, had sounded the keynote of her mind's future analytical activity.

Her parents had been dining and she, after being brought down to dessert, was given a plate of luscious, but rather wet, strawberries.

"No, I will have an apple," she had protested—whereat her mother explained that apples were always procurable while strawberries only lasted a week or two, and that any little girl would be very silly to refuse beautiful summer strawberries for apples that could be got all the year round.

So Elsa had taken the strawberries and eaten them, but all the time she had known exactly why her mother had been so persistent in pressing upon her the more delectable and seasonable fruit.

Yes, she had known well enough that the apples would last over a week, while the wet and luscious strawberries would be wasted if not finished without delay—therefore her mother's thoughtful anxiety that she should eat what appeared better worth eating was merely a subtle ebullition of domestic economy.

And that was Elsa's first vivid recollection of being able to see things exactly as they were, and of keeping the fact of her vision to herself.

Even now as she sat in the garishly vivid boudoir (which

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she had furnished during a mood of defiant freakiness) making the violin keep up a running accompaniment to her thoughts, she felt all she had felt on first realising the skilfulness of her mother's duplicity.

She had so hated her mother for not saying : " Eat the strawberries first, dearie, because they will go bad and the apples will keep good ! "—and this hatred she now extended to the entire World of Hypocritical Pretenders.

At least it would be making a morbidly exaggerated statement to say that Elsa Johnson-Carr hated the world—for, seeing that as a general rule she got on well with the world, she naturally found it a pleasant place stocked with pleasant people. And when she could momentarily deaden her faculties of acute penetration everything was all right.

But the deadening process never lasted long and when it was over she seemed to see even more clearly than before.

Then from the incident of the mother and the strawberries her mind travelled on to a short interlude of school life, followed by a long epoch filled with visiting governesses and masters. And how she had seen through the wiles and machinations of those schoolmates and those governesses !

How the friendliness of those schoolmates had increased with the increase of her own pocket money ! And how those masters and mistresses had given glowing accounts of her rapid improvement while Elsa herself knew—and knew that they knew—that she was an entirely unsatisfactory and backward pupil !

Yes, she had seen through all those polite make-believers just as, later on, she had seen through the pretences of good nuns in a French convent and the impositions of a long-haired *meister* in a Leipsic Conservatorium.

And thus she had walked and moved with eyes open and observations super-acute until, less than six months after her *début*, the young woman within her had responded to the natural demand of the young man—for with the advent of Gerald Johnson-Carr there came a temporary cessation of the power to see things as they really were.

Gerald Johnson-Carr had been very tall and very handsome (Elsa smiled gently as she remembered her late husband's good looks, while soft sounds quivered on the A

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string and melted into mellow harmonics) and he had said so much about Elsa being wonderful and dear and desirable that for the time being her eyes appeared only able to see things as they seemed.

In point of fact she had never tried to see through Gerald until about a couple of years after their marriage—and then she had seen without trying to see!

He had just left the other lady's letter on the mantelpiece, and a new housemaid—a regular communicant and devout Sunday school teacher—had found it while cleaning his bedroom and had brought it in to Elsa with an insolently smug query as to whether it belonged to her and what should be done with it.

(Here the D string rasped for a moment because the disturbing power of an ugly memory is a very lasting thing.)

" Darling Naughty Boy,

" What a lovely time we had on Monday. I wonder whether you enjoyed it as much as I did. When are you going to see your naughty little girl again, and are you going to remember the bracelet when you do? I shall keep writing to you till you say.

" With heaps of love and kisses, hoping soon for another cuddley time.

" Your loving

" FLORRIE."

Yes, that was what Elsa had read, and it was quite superb the manner in which she had taken the letter and said how glad Mr. Johnson-Carr would be that it was found, because there was always trouble when he lost the letter which his cousin lent him to read.

Probably the Sunday school teaching housemaid hadn't believed her, but that didn't matter—the dignity of the household had been saved.

And from that time the veil which a young man's temporary ardour and devotion had caused to be dropped in front of her mental vision, was lifted and once again her sense of comprehending what lay beneath the surface had become super-acute.

For another year after the housemaid's discovery in the bedroom Gerald had lived—lived the more or less isolated life of the found-out husband—then an East wind and

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sensitive lungs had taken him beyond the reach both of his wife's contempt and of Florrie's ill-spelt endearments.

(For a second or two the fiddle gave forth a soft serious sound that might have been the echo of a requiem or the gentle voice of human forgiveness.) Because now that he was no longer drifting around, a subject for the cutest discernment, Elsa felt quite kindly towards the handsome young man who had passed over before having had time entirely to ruin her life. Now that he was in another world she couldn't see through him—and it was always the seeing through which made her hard and bitter.

Yes, for more than three years now Elsa had been a widow, a fiddle-playing, well-off young widow, who was more or less made up to by anybody and everybody for the unromantic reason that she *was* well-off.

For Elsa never deceived herself on this point ; she knew that anybody who had appreciably more money than the majority of people who are not actually rich, need never want for lovers, companions or apparent friends.

The world chases money just as persistently as the unmated woman chases every unwary male who is in any way chaseable.

Elsa knew this, and the knowledge sometimes caused a fierce hatred of enforced affluence to rise within her—for it is only the woman without money who can form any judgment as to her own personal value.

Elsa didn't actually wish that she was not the mistress of a large house set in the best part of an aristocratic suburb that was nearly the country, with a staff of four or five excellent servants—no, she didn't wish that so much as she wished that she needn't be forced to recognise the motives of all those people who made up to her on account of these material blessings.

And if ever she should love strongly and unalterably (as some women do fall into the uncomfortable error of doing), then—oh ! Powers in Heaven, wouldn't she just pray for the mercy of some brain-deadening spell which should prevent her seeing the Loved One as he really was !

For if ever Elsa Johnson-Carr were to love as she could love—love a normal human man with the customary

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failings of normal human men—only a brief respite in the way of mental blindness could keep her from committing either murder or suicide.

It would be quite a toss-up which she would choose.

That is the worst of these women who see clearly and feel deeply!

They are a nuisance!

CHAPTER II

TO DO WITH AN UNCLE

“ *Twan—wang—wang—wang—wang!* ”

Elsa finished her hour of retrospection and music by a sweep of *pizzicato* notes, then she got up and put away her violin just as a very nice young woman came into the room.

The nice young woman's name was Clare Carter, and she freed Elsa's mind from grappling with all the petty problems of existence.

She dismissed and engaged Elsa's servants, ordered meals, wrote all letters which did not require the personal note, dealt with the telephone, suggested when it would be advisable to plant bulbs, or order clothes or give parties, listened when she was required to listen, talked when she was required to talk—in fact, did everything which neither a sense of gratitude nor a substantial salary could ever repay.

For Elsa relied upon Miss Carter, and when once we rely upon a person he or she becomes the jewel of our existence.

“ Have you been practising? ” enquired the jewel of Mrs. Johnson-Carr's existence. The question was obvious and unnecessary, but for that very reason it was restful and soothing.

“ Yes—and thinking! ” replied Elsa, smiling a slow, mysterious smile, which couldn't possibly have been bequeathed to her by anyone except Cleopatra.

“ Thinking that the new apricot *soufflé* which cook inflicted upon us at dinner was more like porridge than a *soufflé*? ”

“ No, I didn't notice that.”

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" You never do notice food, do you, Mrs. Hyphon ? " (Long ago it had been Elsa's suggestion that if Miss Carter called her " Mrs. Hyphon " instead of Mrs. Johnson-Carr, they would feel more friendly and intimate.)

" Oh ! yes, I do when it's in my mouth, but never before or afterwards. I never notice anything that doesn't matter when it's finished with."

" But does anything matter when it's finished with ? " Miss Carter hadn't meant to be introspective, and only tried to say something like something which she thought her companion might have said.

" Of course it does ; things which are finished with and leave their mark behind matter infinitely more than some other things which are going on at the moment. It's past experiences which simply create the human character—and that's the reason why people very rarely have any characters at all until their first youth has gone by."

" But you've got plenty of character, Mrs. Hyphon, and your first youth hasn't gone by."

" My first youth hasn't gone by at thirty and three weeks and two days ? Clare, how can you say such feeble and obviously insincere things. It's nice and kind of you, my dear, but you know I see through all niceness and kindness of that description. A woman's first beautiful youth is gone at twenty ; her second youth is gone at twenty-five, and by the time she's thirty she must set out to score by her mind if she's to score at all. Everything that's beautiful in nature lasts longer than a woman's first youth ! "

Clare Carter nodded sympathetically and smiled. She knew that this wasn't one of the occasions when flattering contradiction would be welcome, so she didn't insist upon her point. But while being silent she looked at the mistress of Burlford Grange, Stoking Common, and thought how very unnecessary it was for her to score by her mind.

For Elsa Johnson-Carr could score by her face and her body and her voice—not always, perhaps, but certainly in seven cases out of ten.

It might be that she could be slimmer with advantage, though this fact was one which never would be acknowledged by people who realised the passionate promises of her full

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bosom and swelling hips ; and it might be that there was a touch of Semitic coarseness about the lower part of her face—but this would be denied by the same people who would deny that her figure was too opulent.

About her skin there could be no argument whatever. It was wonderful. Gardenia petals, tea rose petals, tube rose petals, satin velvet—all these were faulty when compared with the creamy warmth of her face and neck and breast.

Her hair was definitely black, wavy and not at all fine : her teeth were almost aggressively faultless : her nose was a shade too definite : her eyelashes were black and beautiful, and most people said that her eyes were dark grey.

In actual point of fact they were dark blue touched with brown. Had they been black—as might have been reasonably expected—it would have been a tremendous pity.

“ So now, my dear Clare, you see why I went to a museum last week and a lecture the week before—the start of a campaign to improve my mind now that Time is taking away any physical attractions I may have ever possessed.”

Elsa had waited a few moments for a reply to her last observation, but seeing that Clare had thought it more tactful to remain silent she herself had gone on with the conversation.

For after an hour of fiddling and retrospection Elsa always wanted to talk.

“ One wouldn’t think there was much waning of your attractions, physical or anything else, to judge by the offers of marriage you’ve had in the last six months,” Clare answered matter-of-factly, making a tour of the room in order to pummel into position all the cushions which Elsa had in some way disarranged.

“ Oh ! don’t be futile and foolish, Clare ! As if ME, the woman, had anything to do with it. It’s ME, the capitalist in a small way, they want. In point of fact even if any of them had happened to desire me personally that desire would be deadened by the thought of comforts gained by marrying me. Of course I’m not sufficiently well off to be anything like a prize, but I’m useful, and there’s always a chance that my investments may improve and very little

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fear that they'll go down sufficiently for me even to—to—er—well, to have to scrub my own floors and all that sort of thing ! ”

Again Clare smiled, for the idea of Elsa scrubbing floors—the only domestic rite which her brain could dimly grasp or realise—was humorous. Never in all her life had Elsa dusted or swept or even made an unsuccessful pie, and she had never watched other people dust or sweep or make pies, or wondered or thought about how these things got done.

Everything useful—that is the domestic order of usefulness—was as abhorrent to her as it is to some men who are without the “ home-ing ” instinct, and had she ever been forced to wait upon herself instead of always being surrounded by sufficient people to wait upon her the result would have been disastrous.

But as she couldn’t do useful things for herself Fate—with its unsurpassable powers of organization—had always provided her with people who could, and who, curiously enough, swindled and imposed upon her much less than they might have done.

And Clare Carter had been Fate’s trump card as far as the organizing of Elsa’s life was concerned.

“ Yes,” Elsa rattled on as one is tempted to rattle when in the presence of someone paid to listen, “ I don’t believe I am ever wanted for myself. I should like to know if I should be and could be, and I could never know that while I’ve got enough to be useful, and I don’t want not to have enough to be useful so—yes, Barnstable, what is it ? ” She broke off a sentence that was getting complicated in order to make this enquiry of a paternal butler (the conventional fatherly butler who figures in the cast of every superior comedy) who had just entered the room.

“ Mr. Carmena would like to know if you are at home, madam,” he said in an ingratiating voice which seemed to suggest that it would be only courteous and kind to let Mr. Carmena know that she was at home.

“ Oh ! yes, Barnstable—oh ! yes—Uncle Robert ! Shall I see Uncle Robert ? ” This query was put to Clare who, however, wasn’t given time to answer it. “ Yes, there’s less to see through in Uncle Robert than in most men, and

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If he feels it's his duty to look after me from time to time it's only fair to let him. . . . Yes, Barnstable, show Mr. Carmena in."

Barnstable inclined his head as though gratified at the permission received, and a moment later ushered the not unwelcome visitor into the room.

"Hullo! Uncle Robert!" cried Elsa, putting quite a flattering amount of cordiality into the greeting.

But they didn't kiss. The Carmenas were not a kissing family.

"Hullo, my dear! Good evening, Miss Carter. I have been dining at 'The Willows,' and as Mrs. Marsh has just been telephoned the sad news of a relative's death, I thought the most tactful thing was to take myself away. So, being near, I ran the car over here to see if you'd give me the after-dinner drinks which I've missed having there." And at the conclusion of his sentence Mr. Carmena sat down in a large chair and beamed.

He was a large man, and did a great deal of beaming—a cheery habit, which deceived many people into thinking him a pleasant individual created to be imposed upon. Those people were very much mistaken.

"Yes, Uncle Robert, you shall have your drinks," replied Elsa; "in fact, as you gave them to me, I suppose I can't refuse to let you swallow them when you want to. But it's a surprising thing that you ever want them. A pastrycook usually hates cakes, and a dressmaker detests seeing to her own clothes, so I should have thought that you—wine merchant (wholesale, of course, dear!)—would have had no use for fermented grape juice."

"Everyone has a use for it, my dear!—it's only a pose when they pretend they haven't!"

"Oh! Uncle dear, don't play up to your business when you are with me. It's rather a trial to my snobbish nature to know that I've got an uncle who is a great wine merchant—wholesale, of course!—but it makes it worse when you can't forget that your affluence depends on the bestiality of your fellow-creatures. In my mind it's just as bad to be a wine merchant as a—a—White Slave trafficker!"

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Mr. Carmena chuckled delightedly. His late wife had never argued with him, therefore he always cherished an affection for women who did.

"My dear child, if my unfortunate business was as demoralising as you suggest, why did the great Provider give us the juice of the grape and malt and rye and—"

Elsa's interruption was vehement.

"He gave them to us because they are of value as food, but He didn't send them in a fermented condition! That's one of man's little devilments—finding out the secret of fermentation! But I have no objection to people who drink—not the slightest, though I'm not sure that I've ever known any—it's only that I can't *understand* it, and being a hopeless egoist, I combat everything I can't understand and don't do myself."

By this time Clare had rung the bell, and drinks had appeared upon the scene, so while making his next remark Mr. Carmena got up and poured out what he wanted.

"I'm not saying this because I am kept going by the sale of wines," he said less flippantly than before, "but it is my sincere belief that the person who keeps solely to non-alcoholic beverages misses a vast amount of legitimate solace for the disadvantage of being a human creature planted down in an unsatisfactory world. Good lord! my dear, wine is a wonderful thing—wonderful! The smell of the right stuff makes you think your best thoughts if you want to think them, or make you forget if you want to forget. I've never been drunk in my life, and I never want to drink, but the potency of wine is a thing that I've always understood ever since the first day I went to your grandfather's cellars."

"Funny I don't understand it, isn't it?"

"You don't want to understand it."

"I want to understand anything intelligent or anything that broadens the outlook upon life. I'll come and see your cellars one day, Uncle Robert—you've been asking me to ever since I can remember, but now I'll come. Perhaps I shall be more human on the subject of drinks if I know something about it."

Mr. Carmena shrugged his shoulders in a manner that

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was more in accord with his name than with his personality. ~~He~~ Robert Carmena—increasingly wealthy partner in Carmena and Hoyce, wine shippers— inherited more general attributes from his English mother than he did from his Spanish father, and when he did anything unexpectedly airy and Continental, the action was apt to appear slightly incongruous.

For another hour uncle and niece talked with that satisfying ease and sympathy which never exists to the full except between two people of the opposite gender whose relations are entirely sexless, without professional or competitive jealousy, and completely free from control on either side.

Then Mr. Carmena went back to his car and was taken home, thinking as he went that if Elsa didn't take care she might develop certain mild forms of cranky intolerance.

To be a total abstainer, to see through all the pleasant pretences of her fellow-creatures, and to decorate her boudoir with an insistently garish colour-scheme of red, green and yellow—well, surely these three idiosyncrasies alone were enough to suggest that her mental balance was slightly upset.

Uncle Carmena thought it would be better if she married again.

Widowers—in his opinion—were fools ever again to forge the chains which death had, more or less, mercifully broken, but widows—oh! widows were quite a different matter!

CHAPTER III

TO DO WITH NEW IDEAS

WHEN Uncle Carmena had finally taken his departure Elsa crossed over to the inlaid table on which were set out the decanters which had been brought in at his request.

First of all she took out one slim stopper, and sniffed sherry—then another slim stopper and sniffed port—after which followed a disapproving shake of the head and a petulant contraction of the eyebrows. She hated wine.

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Then a fat stopper was taken out, and whisky sniffed—then another fat stopper, and brandy sniffed—

“Ugh!”

At this point a grunt of fervid protest accompanied by a grimace that was reminiscent of evil fairies in old-fashioned pantomimes.

Elsa loathed spirits.

“Clare,” she called out.

Clare appeared instantly. This was one of her most endearing qualities—never being out of the way when she was wanted.

“Yes, Mrs. Hyphon?”

“How do *you* feel about wines and spirits?”

“Oh! I don’t care for them. Sometimes I don’t mind a nice sweet glass of port or some hot claret negus with plenty of sugar in it, but that’s all. I never bother about them.”

Elsa nodded.

“I expect that’s about the safest attitude anyone can take. I don’t believe my own attitude can be quite safe or normal.”

“What, you mean hating them so much?”

“More than hating them—feeling as though they were loathsome enemies who must be wiped out of existence. They *are* enemies, Clare—enemies to apricot tart and cream, and treacle roll, and jam pudding, and molasses cake and sugar-coated *marrons* and all those adorable things which make it a joyous privilege to be possessed of a palate!” (Again she took out a stopper—and sniffed whisky.) “What joy or pleasure could anyone find in putting stuff like this into his mouth—burning unseductive stuff which couldn’t make the tongue feel nice!”

“Not the tongue, perhaps—I suppose that the niceness begins when it gets lower down!”

“What sort of niceness, I wonder?”

“Oh! contentment and placidity and not worrying about anything, I expect.”

“And not being able to see through things and people? Do you think drinking wine would dull one’s powers of penetration, Clare?”

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"I don't know—yes, I should say——"

"Yes, Barnstable, what is it?" Again the fatherly butler had come in, but this time his manner was not persuasive.

"Captain Restrop wishes to speak to you on the telephone, madam," he said in a tone suggesting that of course he would be desired to say that his mistress was engaged. Barnstable did not approve of eligible captains with matrimonial intentions—very disturbing and upsetting results might accrue if they were encouraged.

But on this occasion the suggestiveness of Barnstable's manner produced no satisfying results, for, leaving the bottles on the side table, Elsa hurried out of the room and into the effectively upholstered telephone box at the end of the entrance hall.

"Yes?" (Her voice was friendly but just a hint of malicious laughter lurked behind it.) "No, I haven't been doing anything particular . . . It's very nice of you to want to. What have you been doing? . . . Lucky man! When will this happen? When shall we be able to boast of knowing a millionaire? . . . So soon! . . . Yes, I'd love to hear about it . . . Well, not just yet, I'm afraid! . . . Are you sure you want to? . . . Will it be used for making pennies or kettles? . . . So near! I didn't know there was any there! . . . Yes I'll go if I can—it's nice of you to ask me, and I'll ring you up to-morrow and say if it can or can't be done. . . . I will, yes—no, I won't forget! Ah! I'm sure I'm not the first woman you've said that to! Ha! ha! Good-bye."

The receiver clicked and Elsa went back to the drawing-room.

"Gregory Restrop is quite pathetically obvious," she announced.

Clare Carter looked helpfully enquiring.

"It would have been much better if he had said: '*Have you any money to invest in some copper mines we've discovered in Wales?*' instead of asking about my health and my doings, and incidentally wedging in information to the effect that he regarded himself as a prospective millionaire on account of having discovered copper mines in which every-

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one he knew was going to put all they possessed. His only reason for ringing up was to interest me in the mines, and the wanting to see me and the invitation for us to go motor-ing with his aunt was a cover for copper mines. It was nothing but copper mines all the while, and probably he thought I didn't know it! . . . But I did—I *did!*"

"But, Mrs. Hyphon, it might be that you know wrongly, mightn't it? I am sure that Captain Restrop admires you immensely," argued Clare with real conviction.

"He does not, my dear. No man really admires me—for one reason that my possessions are more desirable than myself! I am cut out by my own possessions, modest as they are, and while a man is reflecting upon what I have *got* he forgets to think about what *I am!* Oh! I see through it, Clare, I see through it all, and I'd give anything in the world to stop myself seeing through it!" And for a second she spoke with a desperate earnestness that seemed entirely out of proportion with the seriousness of the subject.

Clare laughed lightly, and indicated the row of shining decanters.

"Well, there you are—there's the way," she answered, feeling she had said something quite funny.

But Elsa didn't see the funniness. She just took out one stopper and half filled a wine glass with port—one of the specialities which did much to enhance the world-renowned fame of Carmen and Hoyce.

Then she raised the glass to her lips, and drank.

And she found it almost horrible—so hot, so like a wriggling flame as it trickled down the pipe down which it should trickle, and then spread a sense of fire over her whole inside.

It was amazing how she detested swallowing any in-toxicant of any kind!—how antagonistic she felt towards the blazing fluid as it seemed to sear her entire inside! Surely never before had anyone been so anti-alcoholic—not from principle or theory, but simply on account of pure unalterable dislike.

It was vile, too, the way in which the smallest drop of wine or spirits went to her head and made her feel uninterested in everything and regardless of everybody!

Green Grapes

One single spoonful of diluted Australian burgundy would be sufficient to effect some change in her mental condition of the moment !

It was most absurd to be like that ; yet in a way she was proud of being so entirely different from most other people. When she went out to dinner, too—looking full-blooded and passionate and all that abstainers don't, as a rule, look—it always lent a touch of distinction when she would pass champagne and ask for water.

Besides, to be burnt as this port had burnt her throat and was now blazing near the region of her stomach—oh ! yes, without doubt, it was a far better thing to appear prudishly eccentric than to feel as she was feeling now !

She hated wine—*hated* it—and she hated spirits even more !

* * * * *

That night when Elsa went to bed she dreamt that before her stood a huge bottle which gradually began to assume the shape of a man—a man who crept after her, and waylaid her, and made himself pleasant to her until at last she—

And that was when the dream ended and her sleeping thoughts dropped into that blessed state of oblivion which is the nearest approach to happiness that poor harassed mortals are allowed to enjoy. It is only this temporary death which makes it possible for us to carry on and live.

* * * * *

In the morning when Elsa woke, it was with a new idea creeping its way in and out of the archives of her brain. How the idea had got there it would be impossible to say. Perhaps it had crawled in during sleep, perhaps the bacillus of it had been blown in during yesterday's waking hours—but, no matter how it had got there, it appeared already to have become tenacious and unshiftable.

Nothing very complicated in the way of an idea—just a dramatic notion that entire escape from self might bring about new developments of a speculative variety.

Anything might happen if this were tried—anything !

Green Grapes

—and then there would be a chance of seeing the world from a new standpoint.

At first the idea was necessarily nebulous, but gradually it began to develop, and as Elsa lay back in her very luxurious bed she ruminated on the difficulties of leading a double life.

It would be difficult, of course, but there was no reason why it should not be done. She (Elsa) was her own mistress, and as she was the sole proprietor of herself she could naturally do what she wished with herself.

For days—perhaps weeks—at a time she would remain Mrs. Johnson-Carr, of Burlford Grange, Stoking Common, then Mrs. Johnson-Carr would “go away on a visit to an old friend,” while somewhere else a somebody else would come into a meteoric existence!

It would be tremendously diverting to see life from two points of view. It might be soothing, too—and restful!—and helpful!—and inspiring!

And it could be done!

CHAPTER IV

TO DO WITH A WOMAN WHO HAD CHANGED

A COUPLE of days later Elsa was lying in bed, completely and uncomfortably awake, when a letter was brought to her.

That particular morning it was the only letter which had arrived by the first post, and as it lay between the coffee jug and plate of cake (Elsa never ate bread when she could eat anything else) it gave the idea of being significant and important.

Yet it wasn't the usual oblong type-addressed envelope which signifies importance—it was pale grey and almost covered by bold big letters, which suggested a correspondent possessed of tremendous will power.

Dimly Elsa seemed to remember that writing—yes, she *did* remember it, though she couldn't place it—and to feel that it was connected with the not very far-away past.

Green Grapes

She broke a big violet seal, took out a thick square card and read:—

“ My dear Elsa,

“ I daresay you will be surprised to hear from me, but when I went yesterday to Lyllith Darcey's studio to be photographed I saw your portrait among those on show. I have often thought of you, and this made me think of you more than ever, so I got Madamo Darcey to tell me your married name, and then looked you up in the telephone directory, and am now writing to ask when we can meet.

“ You used to be immensely jolly, and I want jolly people nowadays.

“ Do come and see me. I have left Sidmouth Square, and am now living at this hotel.

“ I'll tell you about everything when we meet.

“ It's more than eight years since we've seen each other, isn't it?

“ Ring up and say if you'll come to-morrow or the next day.

“ Yours as ever,

“ OLGA HEAMICK.”

When Elsa had finished reading the card she read it again and decided that she would renew this girlhood's friendship, which she remembered as being somewhat congenial.

For Olga Dunn had been one of those girls who invariably “ make things go ”—not actually witty, perhaps, but full of that surface sparkle which glosses over a touch of commonness or a hint of vulgarity and leaves a cheery impression behind.

And this sparkle and capacity for “ making things go ” had transformed Olga Dunn—daughter of a painstaking music master—into Lady Heamick, wife of Sir Jocelyn Heamick, Bart., and semi-millionaire and owner of Heamick Hall, Denhurst; Glenfarm Castle, Invercally; and No. 00 Berkeley Square.

Elsa reflected upon all these circumstances and set her brain in motion to get a grip of the situation.

“ What has happened to make Olga trouble to write? . . . After her marriage we drifted apart—she practically dropped me, as ‘ risen ’ people of her class do usually drop their comparatively unimportant associates of former days—now she takes me up again—why is it? . . . Why

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does she want jolly people *nowadays*? Why 'nowadays'? What is happening 'nowadays' to make her need the cheering influence of presumably 'jolly people'? . . . Has she lost the social influence which, as her husband's wife, she was bound to acquire? That is usually the reason people return to their 'lesser fry' acquaintances. . . . How does she think I can be useful to her?—because nobody ever looks up anybody after a lapse of time except from an idea of ultimate or immediate usefulness. . . . Shall I see her? . . . Yes, I will—it will be interesting to see through her as well as to see her. . . . I will go on Thursday. . . ."

These were the reflections, and the result of them that Clare Carter telephoned to the Hotel Radium saying that Mrs. Johnson-Carr would call and see Lady Heamick at four o'clock on Thursday—to which message Lady Heamick sent a reply to the effect that she would be delighted to see Mrs. Johnson-Carr at that time.

And thus preparations were made for the taking up of dropped threads—a course of action which is never pursued without having direct bearings on the fateful happenings of the future. One may know people, and keep them up, and make new acquaintances, and drop them or not drop them as the case may be, without changing to any appreciable extent the course of any life.

But it is almost a certain fact that when we meet and renew ties with someone who has entirely passed out of our life, Fate is starting a big campaign. It may be a short campaign or a long one, but it is one bound to create results of some real importance.

The past is a dead thing, and dead things are not brought to life again without a purpose.

* * * * *

At ten minutes past four on the following Thursday Elsa arrived—as arranged—at the Hotel Radium, to learn that Lady Heamick was out.

"I'll wait," she said, concluding that the delay was, for some reason, inevitable.

So she sat down on the lounge and waited—and waited—and waited until it was past five.

Green Grapes

"Are you sure that Lady Heamick is not in?—she has a private suite, hasn't she?"

This query Elsa put to a bulky porter, who replied that he was quite sure Lady Heamick *had* gone out to lunch, also that Lady Heamick *had* got a private suite, and that he would ring up and summon her maid.

So the maid was summoned, and duly appeared presenting the diffident and ingratiating manner of a person paid highly to make feasible excuses.

"Do you know if Lady Heamick remembered I was coming?" enquired Elsa curiously. She was not angry, owing to a pet theory that, unless anything can be gained by anger, perpetual placidity should be cultivated—anyhow in small matters.

"Yes, madam, I am quite sure she did; she was only speaking about it this morning," was the maid's reply.

"Then has she forgotten since?"

"Well, madam, her ladyship didn't lunch till nearly three—she is very late at times—and then she went out to visit the tailor and—and—ah! here is her ladyship!" And breaking off with evident relief at being no longer required to make the best of a bad job, the servant went forward to meet her mistress and rapidly to explain the situation.

Lady Heamick listened—a little impatiently, it seemed—then, evidently bracing herself up to face an awkward moment, she came towards Elsa laughing gaily and holding out her hand.

"I'm late, my dear," she cried with cheery audacity. "It's not my fault—these wretched people will always keep you when you least want to be kept, won't they? Come upstairs—it's splendid seeing you again!—lift!—lift!—can't you hear that I want the lift?"

This last enquiry was shouted with a sudden access of autocratic fury, and when a page rushed up to work the elevator Lady Heamick continued shouting all the way to the second floor—where she had taken her suite on account of there being more air than on the first *étage*.

And as she shouted Elsa watched her and wondered in what way she had altered.

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She was tall and as finely built as formerly, her henna-ed hair of glinting copper was brilliant and luxurious as it had ever been, and her smile just as vivid and whimsical as before.

Her skin, too, was soft and—and—no, now that Elsa looked more closely, Olga Heamick's skin had changed. It was less transparent than formerly and there seemed to be too much of it—so much that in places it hung a little loosely and heavily. Her eyes, also, were tired, with a hint of puffiness round the rims. In these actual details she had changed to a certain extent, and besides skin and eyes there was a general air of being in some way fundamentally different from what Elsa remembered.

“And now what have you been doing all these years ? ” she enquired when the lift had deposited them on the second floor and they were passing the copper-bound door opening into her own private suite.

“I have married and been left a widow,” replied Elsa calmly.

“Ah ! ” The exclamation was very brief but inexplicably poignant, and there was no pretence of condolence. “Have you any children ? ”

“No.”

“Neither have I—luckily for the children ! I should have brought them up so badly if I'd had any. Besides, they interfere with a woman having a good time and I—well, I'm always having a good time ! ha ! ha ! ”

“Of course you are—as you are placed I don't very well see how you could have anything else.”

“Don't you ? ” Lady Heamick laughed again and then kept on laughing as though she had forgotten to leave off. “And what makes you say that ? ” she asked before the laughter had quite come to an end.

“Because it is obvious. You are very rich, you are sufficiently young, you are particularly handsome, you have a thoroughly desirable husband——”

“What makes you say he is desirable ? ”

“Well, I've always heard that he is a very delightful person——”

“And what else have you heard ? ”

Green Grapes

“ Oh ! nothing—— ”

“ *What else have you heard ?* ” Again she was shouting and Elsa felt like the page who had been reproved in the lift.

“ Have you heard about the lady ? ”

“ What lady ? ”

“ Why, my dear husband’s lady—the homely young person who used to live in a suburb and wear ready-made costumes until Jocelyn came along to make things hum. Fancy you not having heard about ‘ Mabel ’ ! ”

“ I haven’t heard anything. But what do you mean ? Is it a—— ”

“ I’ve told you what I mean—that my husband is giving all his devotion and lots of his money to an uninteresting young person called ‘ Mabel ’. She was very good and virtuous but Jocelyn took a fancy to her and stopped all that. They are now doing a tour round the world together ! ”

“ Any divorce coming on ? ”

“ Not likely ! ” Here Lady Heamick shook her head and for a second her face assumed an expression of almost terrible cunning. “ No, Joce would pay almost anything to be free, but I’m afraid I’m not quite so obliging as they would like ! I am the wife and I’m going to remain the wife—and it’s wonderful how little can really be done or managed when there’s a lawful wife who won’t be shifted and—oh ! *tea*, Bateman ! ” This last exclamation seemed almost like a protest and was addressed to the same diplomatic maid who had now appeared with a tea-tray in her hand.

“ Yes, my lady—— ”

“ But who wants *tea* ? Do you drink tea, Elsa ? ”

“ I very rarely drink anything else.”

“ Good lord ! what a punishment for being alive ! If I had to drink tea I don’t think I should ever drink again ! ”

For a moment Elsa didn’t respond, and before she was ready to do so Olga had rushed over to the piano and was beginning to scramble out the air of a new song which appeared just to have arrived.

The maid poured out tea and Elsa drank it.

Then after two or three minutes of murdering a melody

Green Grapes

Olga left the piano, threw herself into a chair and stared into space.

“We must see a lot of each other now ! ”

This came at the end of a prolonged silence, and was shouted almost fiercely and antagonistically.

“Why *now?*” asked Elsa, making the brief enquiry into a demand for explanation.

“Well, because I’m having a good time, of course, and can do what I like, and know who I like, and have what I like—and when I’m having a really good time like that I want other people to have it with me.”

“But you must have any number of friends willing to have good times with you whenever——”

“Oh ! I’ve got through with most of these—it’s old friends, real pals of the past who count——” (here a maudlin smile stretched her soft loose mouth) “and you must be a *real* pal, Elsa—yes, a real pal, and—(yes, that’s right, look after your own tea—I always like people to look after themselves, and—and—oh ! Bateman—” (this was as the maid returned in response to a touch of the bell) “bring me a brandy-and-soda ! ”

Bateman withdrew and a moment later returned with a tumbler one-third full of brandy, to which a small splash of soda had been added.

Lady Heamick held out her hand, took the glass, and swallowed—swallowed—swallowed.

“I think tea is slow poison—I gave it up long ago,” she said with just a touch of explanatory apology in her tone. Then she threw back her head and laughed—and as she laughed Elsa saw through the whole business and understood.

Her old friend had taken to drink—and because she had taken to drink the class of Society in which she was entitled to move more or less expelled her from their circle—and because of being expelled from the ranks of the “big fry” she was now seeking the society of “lesser fry” like Elsa herself.

Of course that was the explanation.

It would have been pleasant and gratifying *not* to see through it, but the cruel clearness of vision which was

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stripping her life of all delicate illusions forced Elsa into understanding exactly how matters stood.

Had it been credible to think that the call of a girlhood's friendship was making yet another effort to be heard, or that propinquity was now rendering it possible for old congenial ties to be renewed, or that there was a sudden yearning for exactly the sort of companionship which she (Elsa) was able to supply, the belief would be a very delightful and emollient one.

But it wasn't credible when, wedged right in the centre of Elsa's mind, was an unblurred Mirror of Truth—a maddening piece of looking-glass in which every ugly, and otherwise hidden, fact was revealed.

Yes, Elsa knew why Olga Heamick was "looking her up" again—quite understood—was under no misapprehension whatever.

But that wouldn't prevent her consenting to be "looked up," because now she was interested in Olga Heamick—interested in the abandoned wife who had swallowed a tumbler of brandy instead of afternoon tea !

CHAPTER V

TO DO WITH A TASTE OF SOLITUDE

"I've decided what I'm going to do!"

It was a couple of days after her interview with Lady Heamick that Elsa made this statement—made it to Clare Carter, and at about seven o'clock in the evening after returning from lunch and an afternoon spent in town.

"What is that, Mrs. Hyphon?" enquired Clare, ready to be interested, and really feeling so—a superb combination for creating complete sympathy.

"Going to take a suite of chambers in Gray's Inn. I've been to tea there this afternoon with Mrs. Pillett. She is cousin to the man who wants to let them, because he has been ordered abroad for his chest or throat, or some part like that—and I'm going to take them. It won't be easy to arrange, but as this cousin, Ralph Oldham, has

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lived there for fifteen years and has got an unblemished reputation, he'll be able to fix it up."

"But what about this house? Are you closing it or—"

"I'm not doing anything with it. You'll be here, and the servants will be here, and I shall be here more than half the time. It's only that I shall have the other place to go to when my moods are too troublesome to let me rest. I shall be a different person. I shall knock off the smaller half of my name—do without the 'Carr' which helps out the 'Johnson.' I'll just be undecorated '*Mrs. Johnson*'—a person occupied in some sort of unobtrusive research work which nobody need know anything about. I don't suppose I shall know anybody or speak to anybody, but my outlook upon life will be different and may, in consequence, change my mental vision. I shall just go there sometimes—when I think I will—and I shall come back when I think I will. The chambers are on the 'phone, so you will be able to get in touch with me when necessary; but no one else must know where I am or what I am doing. I want to be an entirely different person—a creature free to form fresh impressions of Humanity and Life. I want to see if a little complete solitude may be the means of putting softness into my soul and restful blindness into my eyes."

"Well, I expect it's a very good idea." And Clare really thought it was a very good idea because, from the point of view of her own sound sane philosophy, it was a very good idea for any idle woman to follow out any plan which would in some way occupy her mind and absorb some of her unplaced energies.

Dear normal-minded Clare didn't know it herself, but she had *au fond* a kindly and pitying contempt for all women with unoccupied minds and unplaced energies. She was just as sorry for them as she was for fractious babies and obstinate octogenarians. In her opinion they all—idle women, babies, octogenarians—needed something to "keep them quiet," and the only way of "keeping them quiet" was to let them go ahead at something which they believed to be of service either to themselves or the world in general.

Green Grapes

Thus, if Mrs. Hyphon believed that this plan of leading two lives would be of service to her own soul and mind, Clare considered that the enterprise should be encouraged.

"When do you begin—I mean start your tenancy of the chambers?" she enquired.

"Oh! as soon as possible—in less than a week if all the authorities and members and people don't raise any difficulty—and Ralph Oldham says he is sure they won't."

"Where is the place?"

"The address is No. 6 West Passage, Gray's Inn—off Holborn—a little grey and shadowy passage which seems part of South Square and Gray's Inn Square and all those other picturesque bits which I never knew anything about until to-day. The place enchant me. It seems full of mentally-strong ghosts whom we can't see but whose steady minds pervade the solid buildings and remind us that there was an age when we weren't quite such fools as we are now. I'm sure it'll do me good to have a haven where Bacon and Dickens and Johnson and Pepys and all those ghosts who seem so set and settled compared with fly-away geniuses of to-day, will come and tell me what an unnecessary modern product I am! Oh! Clare, I believe I shall grow calmer and more restful if there is some serene spot where I can go and lull the turmoil that's always going on within me! Not a serene spot in the country—for country sights and sounds only put more restlessness into the soul—but just—just—oh! my dear, how terribly tired you must be of hearing about what I want and feel and don't want and don't feel! What a brave good woman you are to put up with me like you do, and what a crown of glory ought to be waiting for you in the next world!"

But Clare only laughed pleasantly and comfortably and without so much as a thought to the effect that a big cheque in this world might be more serviceable than a crown of glory in the next.

Clare never did think cynical, introspective and generally uncomfortable things!

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Exactly five days later "Mrs. Johnson" became the

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Green Grapes

temporary tenant of No. 6 West Passage, Gray's Inn, with all arrangements made for the running of her new haven of rest.

Mrs. Stockley—a very small and particularly northern North Country "char" who lived in the basement and "char-ed" for various members of the Inn—would come every morning to bring breakfast to Mrs. Johnson's bedside and to clean Mrs. Johnson's flat. Then she would go and would only return if Mrs. Johnson came down to her (Mrs. Stockley's) basement abode and said that further service was required.

For it was Elsa's idea to have this second and sub-life as different as possible from the first and world-facing one.

At Burlford Grange she was served by a comfortable plenitude of servants—at West Passage she could do for herself anything that required doing after the "char's" morning visit. At Burlford Grange she would have meals served whenever and however she wanted them—at West Passage she would have to either prepare her own food or go out and get it. At Burlford Grange she was more or less surrounded by people whose aims and methods she could see through at every turn—at West Passage she wouldn't be surrounded by anybody, so she wouldn't be able to see through anybody.

She revelled, too, in the silent simplicity of her new abode.

An old flat grey house with a worn wooden staircase running through the heart of it, and on every landing the usual oaken door protecting the usual inner green door. And behind her own special oaken door and inner green door, a suite of rooms furnished with the restful harmony of an owner whose tastes were a combination of culture and simplicity.

For Ralph Oldham loved books, and books he had left behind him; and he loved oak, and he loved dull green curtains and covers—and when Elsa found herself among them she loved them too.

And she loved, also, another glimpse of green—of vivid green grass which she could see by leaning out of the window, turning her head to the right and peering beneath the shadow of an old grey arch—and she loved the far-reaching views of

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something (it took a day or two to make out if they were hills or buildings or clouds) which gave interest to the distant sky-line—and she loved also the silent and mysterious air which seemed unconsciously to be adopted by every single person who passed by one of the grey entrance gates and made his, or her, way through the old-world precincts of the Inn.

It was all so new, and because it was all so new it was—to her—all so delightful. For Elsa's temperament was one of those which only gain full and potent impressions under the influence of novelty. Had she been a writer she would have written more vividly and enthusiastically about things of which she had a but recently acquired and superficial knowledge than about those details with which she had been familiar for years.

First impressions were everything with her.

* * * * *

On the first day of taking up her tenancy at No. 6 West Passage, Elsa had devoted the morning to arranging such personal luggage as she intended permanently to keep at her secret abode; then she had gone out to lunch at a small restaurant just to the right of the entrance gate nearest to her corner of the Passage, then she had come back to instal herself in her new surroundings. . . .

So here she was! And now that she was here, why was she here? What was there to do, or what would it all keep her from *not* doing?

Now that it was done it seemed more or less futile, and the loneliness of it—

Yes, she had never thought about the loneliness! But how very unself-supporting her own mind must be for loneliness to attack her after less than five hours of solitude! But solitude is a strange thing—one of those things which we believe we yearn for but which, when we get it, seems frightening and unnatural. Just at first we wander round and round, revelling in the splendid supremacy of being alone. We can do what we like and how we like. We can shout at the top of our voice, we can go about with bare feet, we can put on any heavy, dragged expression we like—

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we needn't study what anybody thinks or what impressions we are creating—the freedom of it is joyous !

But after a bit the novelty begins to wane and we leave off wanting to do what we shouldn't do if anyone was present, and we whisper aloud as though making an experiment. Then, if there is a cat anywhere about, we speak to the cat, and feel startled at the sound of our own voice—then we sit down—then we get up and walk about—then we sit down—

Elsa jumped up. She had been sitting down and she couldn't do it any longer.

So she seized the violin which she had brought with her—a second-best one to be installed permanently at the Chambers—and began to dash her bow across the strings.

Violently she played as though trying to diffuse some of the passionate virility of modern life into the tranquil atmosphere of shadowy ghosts—fiercely, noisily, forgetting that time was passing and that in due course it would be necessary again to go out and get another meal.

“*Crish!—crish—h—h—h—*” (the G string was growling now, growling its protest against things as they are) “*croon—croon—n—n*” (on the D and A strings angry arguments were taking place) “*dee—ee—ee—ee—ee—*”

Now the E string was sending out its passionate appeal, an appeal that would soon become a demand that heaven should give all which the bursting, yearning heart—

“*Rap—rap—RAP!*”

This last sound proceeded from the front door—the green front door. Some one was knocking.

Elsa's rapturous solitude was already broken through. Who could it be ?

CHAPTER VI

TO DO WITH A MAN AND A POEM

“*I—ER—*”

Elsa's tone was distinctly combative and haughty as she confronted the first visitor who had the temerity to invade her solitude.

Green Grapes

"Excuse me, but don't say you are 'not at home,' because the very fact of your oak being open indicates that you *are*!"

"My oak—er—?"

"For the benefit of a new comer may I inform you that, according to the etiquette of this and similar abodes, the outer door—known as 'The Oak'—being open is an indication that the resident is at home, and that one is not intruding by presenting oneself."

"Thank you."

Then there was a silence, during which the two strangers took stock of each other.

"Whoever he may be, he is clever, and not ordinary!"

This was Elsa's first mental verdict as she inspected the rather short, middle-aged, immaculately dressed man who stood before her.

There was no precise reason for saying that he wasn't ordinary, because having grey hair that had grown thin above the temples, wearing spectacles, and possessing a certain aloof hesitancy of manner, did not tend to produce any bizarre effect whatever.

Probably it was the extraordinary amount of keen intelligence, human and humane preception and whimsical humour shining from his narrow blue-grey eyes that gave—to a shrewd observer—the impression that this man was neither ordinary nor commonplace.

Also (the thought came to Elsa swiftly and suddenly) there would be less to see through in this man than in most other men. He wouldn't be in the least transparent, yet he wouldn't be "deep." And it is more horrible to be "deep" than to be anything else in the world.

"To begin with, may I tell you my name and who I am?" said the stranger, after mutual stocktaking had been got through.

"Certainly, I think it's due to me," replied Elsa, suddenly flashing a friendly smile that would make any man her comrade if he wasn't her lover.

"I agree with you. My name is 'Timothy Haven'; I am a critic and journalist. I have lived in this house—on the floor above this one—for sixteen years, and I have

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come—or—well, I have come to ask how many hours a day you are likely to practise your violin, and what those hours will be?"

Each sentence was spoken with great precision, and though not the ghost of a smile hovered beneath the grey moustache, Elsa knew that she was being laughed at.

But she didn't mind, for already the ridicule was touched with friendliness.

"Will you come in and discuss this matter sitting down?" she said, ready to interrupt her coveted loneliness at the very first opportunity which presented itself.

"Thank you—with pleasure."

So the top-floor dweller entered the abode of the third-floor (temporary) dweller—and the atmosphere was charged with sympathy.

"We are going to talk sitting down, aren't we?"

"Thank you—yes."

They both sat down, then Elsa touched the fiddle lying on the table, and asked:

"What about this? You don't enjoy my practising, do you?"

Timothy Haven paused a second as though to make sure of his reply being perfectly accurate.

"On the contrary I fancy I *should* enjoy it if it didn't interfere with my getting my living. It struck me as being the most unusually dramatic violin playing I had ever heard—but—er—well, I just want to know when I am to expect to hear it. The only other lady who has ever lived in this particular house used to knock in nails, and my income suffered considerably by her energy. She used to begin at about six in the morning and, with only short intervals between, to go on all day. I could never make out how there was room on the walls to hold all the nails which she must have knocked in."

"And you think my fiddle will be worse than the lady with the nails?"

"I am rather inclined to think it will, because there was no temptation to listen to the other lady's hammering, whereas there will be great temptation to listen to you playing."

Green Grapes

Will you be doing it all day long and most of the night and every day and every night ? "

" No, that's not likely because I shan't be here every day and every night. I have taken this flat furnished from Mr. Oldham but I shall only be a migratory tenant—here just when I think I will and not here when I don't think I will. Also I shall only play the fiddle when I feel any sort of need to let off steam, and I'll try not to feel that need, Mr. Haven, when you are busy with your writing."

" I think that is very kind of you and you have been very lenient in overlooking my presumption, Miss—er Mrs.—"

" *Mrs.*—my name is ' Johnson '. I am not exactly a writer like you, but I do research work."

He inclined his head, looked gravely interested and didn't believe a word she said.

Elsa knew he wasn't believing a word she said, and respected his non-committal attitude in the matter.

" Do you think I shall like living here—that is when I *am* living here ? " she said after a pause and speaking just in time to prevent him from rising and taking his leave.

" If you share my tastes you won't be able to support the idea of living anywhere else ! "

" That is real enthusiasm although you don't say it in an enthusiastic way. I wonder if I shall get the same ! Most of my life has been passed in or round London, yet, do you know, until less than a fortnight ago, I didn't know anything about Holborn except that it had a Circus somewhere at the end of it, and nothing about Gray's Inn except that a few lawyers were to be found knocking around there ! I daresay lots of shallow women are like that. But now that I *am* here I wonder if you will be kind and tell me something about my new environment ? "

" Of course I will, most gladly—though all I can tell you will find in a guide book, I'm afraid. Guide books are death to any display of individual erudition in the matter of topographical or historical excellence."

" What a lovely sentence ! "

And just those few words of impulsive chaff, it was, that settled and established a comfortable feeling of comradely friendship between the third floor and the top floor—for

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Tim Haven chuckled delightedly at the impertinence of his new acquaintance and the new acquaintance liked the whimsical humour of his face while he chuckled.

"Well, now, do talk like a guide book and tell me something about where I am," demanded Elsa when they had finished laughing at themselves and each other.

"You are in the land of Dickens, Johnson, Bacon, Pepys, Sir Roger de Coverley, Jacob Tonson and a dozen other big minds who have left indelible traces behind them. Round the corner is the house in which Dr. Johnson sat up and wrote 'Rasselas' in a single night for the purpose of getting money to pay for his mother's funeral. There is the old archway—now beplastered—over which Dickens made 'David' and 'Dora' lodge, and there—"

"But isn't there a ghost of any description to be found?" Elsa never failed to interrupt ruthlessly when she felt in any danger of getting bored—and she had always disliked "David" and "Dora."

"A ghost?" Tim blinked and passed his hand across his forehead. It disconcerted him to have his mind wrenched off one subject to be switched on to another. "A ghost?—er—oh! yes, there is Bacon."

"What about Bacon?"

"There is the statue in South Square—under the archway there—"

"What does it do?"

"I have no reason to believe that it does anything, but the legend goes that at five o'clock in the afternoon it gets down and walks round the square. In fact, so settled a legend is it that rarely a day passes without a few kiddies creeping round and peeping under the archways to see what they can see."

"How joyous! But it would be much more effective if the statue were supposed to come down in the hush of night. Afternoon ghosts are never worth troubling about."

"Well, some people do contend that the entertainment takes place at night—particularly when the moonlight is bright and clear. So you are quite at liberty to adopt whatever view you prefer."

For more than an hour the conversation continued

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until at last when Timothy Haven got up to take his leave two people who in the morning had never heard of each other's existence both felt that a destined friend had come into their lives.

Probably neither would play any prominent or fatal part in the other's daily round, but while propinquity kept them in touch the connection would be pleasant and helpful.

With all of us the people we meet are divided into four groups—those who make our lives, those who mar our lives, those who help our lives, those who hinder our lives.

And with Timothy Haven and Elsa it would, in all probability, be a case of helping each other's lives.

Neither wanted anything from the other, yet they felt in sympathy.

Such is the basis of all either profound or passing friendships.

* * * * *

When Timothy had gone Elsa did nothing until convention more than appetite demanded that she should eat again. But as convention did demand she once more went to the small restaurant outside the nearest entrance gate and consumed a suitable amount of food, after which there was nothing to do except to return whence she had come.

For it would be quite outside the spirit of present adventure to go and call on anybody or to ring up anybody ; besides, as she had come here in order to gain respite from seeing through the world and its wily inhabitants, humanity must be kept at bay as much as possible.

So Elsa came back through the shadows and the arches, mounted the wooden stairs and once more reached her third floor retreat.

This time she shut "the oak" as well as the inner green door, for there was no use in leaving a sign that visitors might be permitted to call when there was no prospective visitor who knew where she was !

So Elsa went in and for almost the first time in her life steeped her mind and soul in the ghost-filled atmosphere of unbroken loneliness.

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Nobody to say anything which really meant something else—nobody drawing *her* on to say something which it might be unwise to say—nothing to find out, nothing to see through, nothing to sour the imagination, nothing to embitter the heart—

Yet in a way it was maddening—like being hungry without the possibility of securing food. Mental hunger and nothing to assuage it.

But there was food—safe, silent food—ranged upon those shelves set in the niches on either side of the fireplace! Books—books—yes, of course, it was up to Elsa to combat this most contemptible feeling of loneliness by making a huge mind-meal of books!

So she took down volume after volume, but nothing gripped her or absorbed her to such an extent that she could forget to keep glancing up half-nervously to see why the shadows in one corner of the room gave that uncomfortable impression of appearing like half-developed substances.

No, to-night books were of no use—anyhow, not these particular books—but on the lowest shelf of all was a pile of magazines—possibly those would better fill the need of the moment!

So Elsa picked up half-a-dozen English and American magazines, which proved to be either current issues or those of the previous month.

Idly she turned over the leaves without discovering anything which even momentarily held her thoughts until in *The Cosmo Magazine* she found a short poem entitled, “*What to do with the World.*”

“ If a man or woman gets hold of the world
And as an asset decides to treat it,
There is no trouble that will seem like a trouble
When they’re called upon to meet it.
It’s playing up to the world that’s the great mistake—”

And on went the poem for not more than ten four-lined verses, but when Elsa came to the end of the last one she felt that all the philosophy which she herself had been groping to cultivate was expounded by a writer who signed him- or herself “*A. Bee.*”

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She read the poem again, and then, fired by that irrepressible enthusiasm which, as a rule, only attacks people who are idle, affluent and entirely free from care, sat down at the table in the window and dashed off a letter to the author.

" 6 West Passage, Gray's Inn.

" To A. BEE.

" I am so bursting with appreciation that I can't help dashing off a line to tell you how intensely I admire your poem, 'What to do with the World,' which I have just read in the 'Cosmo Magazine.' You have expressed all I have always wanted to express, and if one could only follow your philosophy the difficulty of existence would be solved. But that's the trouble—we can't take things like that. The horrible restlessness of unsatisfied something which burns within us all makes us let the world crush us instead of letting us insist upon crushing the world.

" How much I should like to know who you are, and what you are, and what has taught you to think as you think!—even if you don't carry out your own philosophy!

" I wonder if you are a man or a woman! I wonder if you are weighed down by the curse of being able to see through everything and everybody like I am! I wonder if you have ever sought solitude as I am seeking it now just for the sake of escaping the torture of your own introspective mind. And I wonder if you have found solitude as unsatisfactory as I'm sure I shall find it!

" Of course, you don't in the least want to know who I am, but as my mood of the moment is an expansive one, I think I'll tell you that I am a widow, aged thirty years and a few weeks, that my brief married life ended with one of the usual disillusionments, that I am living intermittently at the above address for the purpose of changing my outlook upon life, that I—

" No, you don't want to know anything about me, do you? I am just an appreciative reader—and I daresay there are plenty of those!

" It would be nice of you to answer this and make some comment on all I have said. But I don't expect you will—no, to be perfectly candid (and this is a horrid habit which I cultivate as much as possible), I do rather think you will, because in what I am writing now you will detect a strain of real sincerity.

" And a philosopher like yourself should appreciate sincerity.

" From

" ELSA JOHNSON."

When Elsa had finished writing she sealed her letter, addressed it "*care of*" the Magazine "*to be forwarded*," stamped it and left it on the writing table ready for Mrs. Stockley to post directly she arrived in the morning.

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What she had just done was one of the diversions of an aspiring schoolgirl anxious to get in touch with a mind stronger and more brilliant and more original than the minds of her own relatives and associates.

This she knew quite well, but it pleased her to do it—and she had done it !

Yes, she had done it, and, having done it, she—er—well, now she would go to bed !

There was nothing to do except to go to bed.

It was a temptation to ring up someone—anyone—on the telephone—but she wouldn't succumb.

She had rather thought that Clare might have rung up—though, of course, she had been instructed not to do so unless there was any special message to put through.

Still it would have been nice to get in touch with somebody—

No, it wouldn't ! She would go to bed—go to bed amidst the improving society of the ghosts of Gray's Inn !

CHAPTER VII

TO DO WITH "A JOLLY TIME"

THE next morning Elsa talked a good deal to Mrs. Stockley when she came to clean the flat. This was an astonishing thing to do, seeing that Elsa's dislike for the lower classes was a serious blot on the Christian side of her nature. But when the human tongue wants to wag it will wag to a perspiring north-country charwoman rather than not wag to anyone at all.

Then in the afternoon she talked to Tim Haven whom she happened to meet on her way home from lunch. This conversation was enjoyable and did something temporarily to improve her opinion of humanity.

But in the evening there was nothing to do except to go out and look for ghosts until—the telephone bell tinkled !

It was Clare ringing up to deliver a message which had

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just been put through from Lady Heamick—a message to the effect that she was all alone and would be so glad if Elsa would go round and have dinner with her—not dress or anything of the sort, as Lady Heamick was quite by herself.

For a second Elsa considered the matter, a consideration which resulted in a request that Lady Heamick should be rung up and told that Mrs. Johnson-Carr would be with her in a little over half-an-hour.

After this a few moments' chat with Clare—enquiries concerning home matters and a brief description of her own doings and feelings—then the receiver put back and a hurried toilet performed.

Never before had Elsa so much looked forward to going out to dinner.

Solitude is an absolute specific for putting appreciation into the human soul.

We will appreciate anything or anybody when we are tired of ourselves !

* * * * *

When Elsa reached the Hotel Radium she was at once shewn up into her hostess's private suite where dinner was laid in the dining-room, and where—in the drawing-room leading out of it—sat Olga still wearing the hat which, presumably, she had been wearing all the afternoon.

It was a wonderful and costly hat, but the Bird of Paradise plume which swept all over it seemed grotesque and ridiculous. Perhaps it may have been that the hat itself was set at a rather grotesque angle.

“ Ah ! hullo ! ” cried Lady Heamick in tones of the cheeriest welcome, yet somehow suggesting that just for the moment she had forgotten that Elsa was expected. “ Look at me in a hat ! ” she went on swaying her head from side to side so that the feather waved in a truly comic fashion. “ I've had it on, you know, to go out in—oh ! my goodness, what haven't I been doing this afternoon—everybody worries me so and keeps me so busy ! —yes, I've had it on and haven't taken it off. But we're old friends, aren't we, Elsa ? You don't mind, do you, Elsa ? ”

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And while putting this last query she leant forward and gave Elsa's shoulders a friendly pat—leant forward and came close enough for her spirit-saturated breath to reach the nostrils of a young woman who hated intoxicants more than she hated anything else in the world.

Elsa kept herself well in hand to avoid shuddering.

Yet it was interesting—it would be really interesting to spend the evening with a woman who was drunk !

“ Of course I don’t mind,” she answered readily, “ but all the same I’ll take mine off if you don’t mind. I never feel really comfortable when I’ve got a hat on.”

“ Oh ! yes, you take it off—take everything off if you like, my dear—I’m sure the waiter won’t mind ! ha ! ha !—Bateman, come here !—Bateman ! ”

Bateman appeared.

“ Take Miss Mer—er—I mean Mrs. Thompson-Carey’s hat and—and bring me brandy-and-soda ! ”

Bateman assented silently and did exactly what she was told.

In two gulps Olga swallowed the drink, which just at first seemed to have a curiously sobering effect—so sobering, in fact, as to bring to the hostess’s mind recollection of the fact that it was nine o’clock and she had invited a friend to dine.

So dinner was served, and they went in the other room, but while Elsa ate with the appreciative enjoyment which a rather hungry young woman must feel towards a well-cooked meal, Olga only nibbled here and there and scarcely made a pretence of keeping her guest company.

“ What a jolly time one can have when one wants to ! ” she remarked irrelevantly when the immediately sobering effects of the brandy-and-soda began to pass off and give place to a new condition of drunken conviviality.

“ Well, I want to have a jolly time, but I don’t think I have it,” replied Elsa, with a touch of rather acid amusement at her own expense.

“ Ah ! that’s because you don’t go the right way to work, my dear ! Don’t you care about anything—just you go your own way, and do what you want to do. You can always get plenty of friends—plenty of jolly friends

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if you're only jolly yourself. That's what I say—be jolly all the time. I used to—to—to not be jolly, but I've given that up! It's no use. What's the good of it?—just tell me, what is the good of it?"

"Well, I suppose—"

"Look here, my dear, don't you argue with me! You always were a girl for arguing, I remember, but I won't let you do that now! I know too much—too much, I tell you. (No, Bateman, I won't have any wine—only brandy-and-soda—no, I'll have just a glass of champagne—all right—yes, all right.) Yes, Elsa, I know too much—and—oh! my God! why do I know so much!—why do I know?"

The breakdown was instantaneous. Her arms were on the table and her head with its radiant masses of henna-ed hair was resting upon them while heavy convulsive sobs shook her finely formed shoulders.

Elsa looked at her, but she didn't go over and endeavour to administer futile consolation by means of pattings and strokings, which couldn't possibly have any healing effect on any broken heart.

For a second or two she neither said nor did anything, then, leaning across the table, she momentarily laid one strong, firm hand on the weeping woman's arm and asked a perfectly simple question.

"Why are you unhappy, Olga?"

Lady Heamick looked up immediately and revealed a face which seemed entirely different from the face of a few moments previously. *That* face had been handsome, humorous in a rather maudlin sort of way, and to an extent attractive—*this* face was puffed and swollen, grey, tragic, old and terrible.

"It's because I can't help remembering sometimes," she whispered. "I don't often remember, but when I do it's hell. I remember how he kissed me the first time and told me that with that kiss every bit of his heart had gone out of him and come to me—and it could never leave because I was his '*only girl for ever!*'—that's just what he said, his '*only girl for ever!*'—and now he—he's going round the world w—with—"

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Again she broke down, and Elsa felt almost crushed by the weight of her own impotence. This was a terrible thing she was faced with—a love that wouldn't die, but yet was killing its unfortunate victim.

Olga Heamick loved the husband whom she might very reasonably have been supposed to marry for the sake of material benefits, and because he was away from her, and with somebody else she was living out her life in hell.

"But you and your husband didn't agree very well, did you?" asked Elsa matter-of-factly. She felt that nothing but matter-of-factness could possibly help the situation.

Again Olga lifted her head and showed the tragic swollen face.

"No, but that didn't matter if he had stopped with me," she muttered indistinctly.

"But perhaps it was your fault—perhaps you did something that made it impossible for him to stop with you." This sounded brutal, but Elsa knew that a woman is often best comforted by believing that she is responsible for her own misery.

"He said I was always late, and I wouldn't have children and—and—oh! but he might have stopped and not gone away!—he needn't have gone!"

"He'll come back most probably—husbands generally do. And until he does, you must be plucky and make a good thing of your own life—"

"Yes, I will, I will!" She got up suddenly and declaimed: "I'll make a good thing of my own life—I will. I'll dance when I want to and I'll sing—yes, I'll sing! What shall I sing? '*Every little while I feel so lonely; every little while I feel so s—s—s—sad—*'"

This time she rushed through the curtains from the dining-room into the drawing-room, and when Elsa followed she found her hunched up in one of the big brocade-covered chairs again covering her face with her hands.

A cheerful hostess and a lively evening for the invited guest!

Elsa wondered if she would go, then just as she was

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wondering Olga made what appeared to be a gigantic effort and pulled herself together.

"I am sorry to treat you to this," she said still speaking unsteadily but evidently contriving to gain a certain control over her own emotions. "We get attacks of giving ourselves up to our troubles, don't we?—and I'm an awful fool to let mine *be* a trouble. Perhaps it isn't really—I don't believe it is, because when I want to be jolly I'm just as jolly as anyone can be. You think I seem jolly, don't you?"

Elsa looked at her and was seized by a sudden irresistible inclination to say exactly what she felt prompted to say.

"Why do you do *that*, Olga?" And with the last word she pointed to a table on which stood the glass which had contained brandy-and-soda.

Olga hesitated and looked sly. For a second or two it seemed as though she intended to be indignant, or to deny, or to pretend lack of comprehension. But Elsa's eyes were fixed upon her, and something in their depths—perhaps a fount of intense sympathy which neither words nor caresses would be permitted to express—put an end to pretence.

Olga Heamick would revel in the luxury of talking about the only pleasure she had in the world.

"I do it because it makes me happy," she answered quite soberly and quite sensibly.

"You don't mean *happy*—excited or stimulated, but not happy."

"Yes, really happy. We are all miserable because we feel too much, and *that* puts a stop to feeling—at least to a large extent it does. All we want in this world is not to be able to *feel* the things that worry us, and nothing else makes us like that."

"You mean just at the time, I suppose?"

"No, I don't. When you've once got into the habit the effect doesn't go off. What made me such a blubbering fool just now was that this last couple of days—yesterday and up to lunch time to-day—I've been trying to keep off it. I got a sort of idea that I would lead a life of abstinence—ha! ha!—and my little busterino just now was the result! You don't look particularly cheery, my dear—you've got a

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rather gloomy-aunt-Susan sort of look about you and I believe that's all the result of ginger ale and tea ! You'd be more pleasure to yourself and to other people if you would give up swallowing the wrong sort of wet drinks. I'm sure that people who are what they call ' abstainers ' get morbid and weak in their heads."

Elsa made some vague reply and tried to turn the conversation, but now that Olga Heamick felt free to talk about the only solace which the world was able to offer her, she clung on to the subject with almost fierce tenacity.

So earnest did she become that positively she kept sober in the praise of drink !

And when at last—at about eleven o'clock—Elsa insisted upon taking her departure Olga presented her a parcel which Bateman had evidently been instructed to prepare.

" What is it ? " enquired Elsa pressing and pinching the oblong packet.

" Something I want you to try—a toilet water I'm specially keen on. Now, promise to use it—anyhow, give it a trial."

" Yes, thanks very much, I promise."

" You'll try it to-night ? "

" Well, what do I do ? "

" You'll find all directions on the bottle."

" Very well then I'll follow them. I shall be anxious and eager to get ho—er—back so that I can sample my present. Good night, Olga ! "

" Good night, my dear—let's meet again very soon. I shall ring you up—I shall always be ringing you up because old pals ought to keep on being pally. We'll have some jolly times together ! "

Elsa agreed that they would, for, although she saw through it all and realised exactly why she was " taken up " after being dropped, she nevertheless was willing to be " taken up. "

The case of Olga Heamick interested her. It would be instructive to discover if she was inconsequently happy and contented with things as they came along, or if she was pitifully and pathetically heart-broken. On the whole, Elsa was inclined to think that the former condition prevailed.

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And if it did contentment was solely due to the "fermented grape juice" so sturdily upheld by Uncle Carmena.

Yes, of course Uncle Carmena—and now Olga Heamick!

It seemed as though she—Elsa, the Abstainer—was suddenly being saturated (mentally) with "fermented grape juice"—as though Bacchus had made up his mind to become her lover and was getting other people to prepare the ground for his wooing!

CHAPTER VIII

TO DO WITH A MIDNIGHT CALL

COMING home that night was an eerie business, and when Elsa had closed the two doors behind her she decided that this wasn't the right way of taking up solitude as a hobby.

There ought to be a cosier and more restful solitude—some lonely atmosphere which would make her feel contented and placid instead of (as was now the case) having her mind more than ever crammed with introspective and generally uncomfortable thoughts.

Elsa took off her hat and light cloak she was wearing and suddenly and for no reason whatever thought about love. At least there might have been a reason in poor Olga—Olga who, having practically every possession which a woman could desire, was breaking her wild irrational heart on account of a man who preferred another woman to her.

And this was love—the love of the sexes which for so long now had seemed to Elsa like nothing but a legend!

Love!—the love of a man for a woman and a woman for a man—the love that meant kisses and embraces and the rapture of a lingering touch, the love which made every parting a more or less poignant agony!

And this sort of love Elsa knew as little about as if she had been a Bride of the Church instead of a widow of a barrister.

Suppose, now, that instead of being alone here among the ghosts of dead geniuses (geniuses who, had they lived to-day, in all probability wouldn't have been able to get into print!!) a man was standing with his back to that

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quaint old corner cupboard, arms outstretched and eyes ablaze with that radiant sparkle which comes to the eyes of one human being who desires to possess another human being.

Yes, yes, Elsa *could* almost suppose—yes, standing here with only one dim light illumined she could almost see him,

He was broad and strong and—but his face was invisible, and a blurred haze filled up the space where his features ought to be !

Suppose he were there, and were suddenly to come forward and hold her close and crush some of the life-breath out of her body in the fervour of his embrace!—suppose all this and imagine the rapture !

Heaven ! imagine the rapture !!

And this was the effect of solitude—this new vague longing for something practically untried and altogether forgotten !

It was wild—it was absurd, because it was impersonal—it was extraordinarily undignified and must cease instantly.

Elsa must divert her mind and forget that she was so completely alone. And how could this be done?—how *could* it ?

Well, to begin with, it could be done by opening the long parcel which Olga Heamick had insisted upon her bringing away—opening it and sampling the toilet water which, of course, would do wonders for the skin.

Immediately Elsa got busy, untied the parcel and produced the large bottle which Olga had thrust into her hands at parting.

It appeared to be an ordinary brandy or whisky bottle—and inside was liquid the colour of deeply-tinted straw—and hanging round the neck of the bottle was a label covered with Olga Heamick's huge, bold handwriting.

“Half a tumbler to be taken immediately—to be followed up by a second and larger dose—a guaranteed cure for all mental and bodily ills! If not tried at once those ills may go too far to be cured.”

That's what Olga had scrawled on the label, and when

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Elsa took out the cork and raised the bottle to her nostrils she sniffed the (to her) revolting smell of brandy.

So Olga was supplying her with the specific for deadening over-acute emotions and intuitions !

The "toilet water" was spirit—an intoxicant—something that would produce a deadening of over-acute sensations !

Elsa got a tumbler and poured some of the brandy into it.

The odour was extraordinarily horrible—it made the linings of her nose tingle as she smelt.

Then she sipped the smallest imaginable sip, which seemed to burn her tongue, sear the pipe down which it trickled, and finally to tear and wrench at the linings of her stomach !

What a ghastly sensation to have in one's inside a flaming volcano !—a blazing furnace, which sent its heat from the inside to the outside and up to the chin and tips of the ears and nose !

Elsa was blazing and burning, and to cool the spurious fever running through her veins she opened one of the narrow casement windows and leant out to catch the chilly breezes of night.

"Hullo—ullo—ullo!"

The call came from below and, looking down, she saw a splash of white shirt front and the flap of an Inverness overcoat.

It was Tim Haven.

"Oh ! come in and see me on your way up !" she called down impulsively.

"Right-o ! Right !" rose the answer—and three minutes later both doors were opened to admit the smart *bien soigné* figure of the dramatic critic.

"Do you know, I think I have snared you in for the purpose of discovering if you would advise me to become an habitual drunkard !" This was Elsa's peculiar greeting, but one which did not cause Timothy the slightest surprise. For he was one of those men who have seen so much of every side of the world and its ways and people that the faculty for being surprised had entirely left him—so much so, that he was not even surprised at not being surprised !

Also he had immediately summed up his new neighbour

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as being a woman who insistently dragged her mind away from normal grooves. If she had found herself thinking, or wanting to say anything conventional and ordinary, she would put a stop to any such uninspiring inclination.

Therefore Timothy was not in the least disconcerted by this unexpected commencement to their conversation.

"Well, I shall be pleased to advise you to become or not to become an habitual drunkard, just as you prefer," he said, speaking after one of his customary moments of hesitation.

"No, I don't really think I want your advice, because I feel convinced I shall *not* follow the counsel of a friend who has just given me this bottle of brandy labelled as you see."

Tim blinked his eyes, then read the label and gurgled with the sincere amusement of one who finds the fullest amount of humour in every humorous situation.

"Have you sampled the doses at all yet?" he enquired drily.

"Oh! I'm not intoxicated now, if that's what you mean. I believe I have swallowed one whole teaspoonful and that, I admit, is enough to—to—well, to make me exceptionally brilliant as you see me now. (Pardon? Did you interpolate? Not? Really! I'm surprised!) But I am not drunk—and I *am* very hot and very sick, and the moment you're gone I shall eat all the chocolates I've got in the place as a guarantee to my inside that it won't again be required to receive streams of liquid fire!"

Tim bowed gravely—blinked—and then remarked—

"May I be permitted to mention that because your own particular inside jibs at liquid fire the insides of your friends and—er—neighbours—er—well, they may *not* jib!"

Elsa dropped into a seat and laughed joyously. She did so thoroughly revel in anyone who was quaint and funny and witty, and this dramatic critic from the top floor was very much all three.

"Mix it yourself!" she cried. "I'm sure that Mrs. Stockley—*your* Mrs. Stockley, *my* Mrs. Stockley, *our*

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Mrs. Stockley!—told me that ‘*the soda water hard coom oop.*’ I believe it’s in the corner there.”

Tim nodded and immediately found the required article—also a couple of glasses, also a small tray—moving with the resourceful neatness of a man unaccustomed to much feminine supervision.

“I believe you know as much about this place as I do,” observed Elsa, watching his swift, precise movements, and liking them.

“I should venture to say that I know more, for the reason that I have been acquainted with Ralph Oldham and this flat for over six years, and, for another, because I am possessed of the self-help spirit—which you are not.”

“You are quite right—I am not. All the same I do know how to look after my guests, and if we had been in my own house—oh ! ”

She pulled up sharply, and with this ingenuous exclamation, because there had come the sudden recollection that her companion didn’t know she had a house, or anything about her. And it would spoil the somewhat romantic and dramatic atmosphere surrounding her present life and circumstance if anybody were to know anything about her.

For, so long as concealment is not necessary, mystery is a most fascinating thing. Playing at mystery is a truly thrilling game.

But Elsa needn’t have feared that her tongue-slip would call forth any enquiries or even any observations, for at the very moment she broke off with her “oh ! ” Timothy splashed out a noisy squirt of soda, which brought one glass to a satisfactory condition of fulness.

“Now, this is for you,” he said, setting it down before her.

“Oh ! you *are* going to follow the line of my other advisers—you *are* urging dipsomania as a hobby ! ”

“No, that is not my idea. I merely suggest a little light cool, *weak* refreshment on a warm night.”

“Oh ! no, that’s far too moderate and ordinary for me. Moderation is death to originality, or drama, or great moments ! When I *do* drink, *mon voisin*, it’ll not be a

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lady-like brandy-and-soda—it'll be tumblers of undiluted wine and neat spirits ! Something to dull me and blind me right away—not just enough to make me flippant and skittish ! But no——" she was earnest again now—" I can never be dulled or blinded in that particular way because my intense, innate and unconquerable loathing of any and every sort of intoxicant couldn't be overcome. In that respect my tastes are pure to a childish and most *bourgeoise* extent—I love puddings, I adore squashy pastries and tartlets with cream and jam and things inside, I revel in chocolates, and I am simply a wolf on *petits fours* ! Anyone who is like that could never find solace in the Nirvana of drink ! "

Timothy agreed that such might be the case, then after having a little further discussion on the subject, and finishing his suitably mixed brandy-and-soda, he said good night, and went up to his own flat to get through a couple of hours' reading before retiring to bed.

But before opening the particular book into which he was about to dive with painstaking thoroughness, he devoted exactly ten minutes to reflections upon the subject of his new friend on the next floor.

He liked her.

To a certain extent he understood her.

He was sorry for her.

He was afraid for her.

CHAPTER IX

TO DO WITH THE TRUTH

THREE mornings later Elsa lay in bed in her own room at Burlford Grange.

She couldn't exactly say that she was glad to be back though the comforts of being waited on by trained servants, of having meals when and where seemed most desirable, and of being surrounded by everything that was likely to be required at any and every moment, were not to be overlooked.

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And because she appreciated these comforts more than she had ever done before came the knowledge that her experiment in Gray's Inn was a more or less salutary one:

Also, in some vague way, there was a certain amount of pleasurable excitement and anticipation to be gained from the idea of returning to the haunt of Dickensian and Baconian ghosts just as soon as the next call for solitude sounded in her ears.

And as she lay in her own large and luxurious bed, Elsa thought quite kindly of the small and undecorated one on which she had slept the night previously.

Probably if she had to sleep in it always she wouldn't think at all kindly about it, but, not being compelled to go near it unless she felt inclined, the rather knobbly mattress and somewhat hard pillow became invested with a certain halo of desirability.

For such is the law of life. Anything which has a claim upon us arouses our antagonism. Desire is killed by demand. . . .

Since seven o'clock Elsa had been awake, therefore when, at a quarter to eight there came the advent of coffee, toast, papers and letters, she was ready for them all.

First of all the coffee was sweetened and Elsa drank it, then she glanced at "The Times" to ascertain that there was no reason why she shouldn't defer reading it, then she inspected the four communications which had come by post.

The first was a dinner invitation to a house at which Elsa knew perfectly well she would meet a certain artist who was painting the hostess's portrait, and who would knock a certain percentage off his charges if through the aforesaid hostess he secured a commission to paint one of her friends.

Elsa wished she didn't comprehend the exact reason for being invited to dine at Lady Prattleys, but as she *did* comprehend there was no use in pretending to herself that she didn't.

The second communication was a receipt.

The third was a prospectus of a new company. (Elsa realised the source whence that had come.) And the fourth

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was a letter which must have arrived at West Passage immediately after her departure—arrived by the second post and been forwarded by the reliable and conscientious Mrs. Stockley.

The letter was addressed to “Mrs. Elsa Johnson,” and bore a Westmoreland postmark.

Elsa opened it and read :—

“ I am very proud and very grateful that you are pleased by my verses in ‘The Cosmo Magazine,’ and your letter has made me feel as though we had known each other for a longer time than I have been alive.

“ You are good enough to say that you want to know something about me. Well, there is very little to know. I am a man, aged thirty; I am a bedridden cripple, and my eyesight is failing. I have been delicate all my life, and the last five years have hurried things on so that the end can’t be very far off.

“ I live in a small creeper-covered cottage, from which I can see a lake and hills and trees, which I love, and a dear, good aunt looks after me.

“ At one time I revolted at destiny, but for the past eighteen months I have seen things in a different light, while there has come to my mind the philosophy which I express in those verses which you are good enough to praise.

“ I write when I feel I want to write, and when there are thoughts in my heart which I cannot speak. I believe that if you had time regularly to correspond with me it would help me very much, and give me something to think about besides myself.

“ I wonder if you will do this. I shall be very happy if you will, and if when you write you will tell me all you think and feel. I believe that it might be possible for a greater friendship and intimacy to exist between people who have never met or are likely to meet than between those whose mutual feelings are swayed by each other’s personality.

“ Please say what you think about this.

“ Concerning what you say in regard to solitude, it is my opinion that solitude is helpful and comforting for those who will soon be released from the treadmill of earthly life, but for those who are right in the heart of the world and its difficulties and interests I think it is fraught with many dangers. Take my advice and be very careful of this solitude which is appealing to you as an antidote for the ill of a too-clear mental vision.

“ I know all that you mean about seeing through the world and its people and its ways, but I do not think solitude will help to throw dust in your eyes.

“ It is my belief that only Love and Happiness can do this. These are the two most softening influences in life. A man or woman who loves is like one who has drunk deeply of a potent wine—the

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sense of joy and rapture rendered more acute, the sense of bitterness, pain and cynical observance dulled into nothingness.

"I will not write any more until I hear that you wish me to do so, but I shall greatly look forward to hearing from you.

"ANNOCK BEE."

This was too extraordinary!—this unknown friend, as well as the others, trying to press the claims of Bacchus!

"And a woman who loves is like one who has drunk deeply of a potent wine. . . ."

This one sentence alone showed it to be the writer's belief that the highest condition of earthly contentment was achieved by the help of "fermented grape juice!"

Naturally Annock Bee hadn't intended to propound this doctrine, but he had undoubtedly presented it as an obvious deduction!

To Elsa it seemed little short of uncanny for this counsel in favour of inebriation to come from the other end of England as well as from Olga Heamick and Uncle Carmena!

The idea amused her extremely, and lying back on her big bulging comfortable pillows, she laughed almost aloud.

Even those few days of solitude at West Passage had got her into the habit of feeling a certain satisfaction at the sound of her own voice.

* * * * *

The rest of that day Elsa spent in the way in which women who are sufficiently popular, sufficiently young and sufficiently affluent, do spend their days. That is to say, she talked on the telephone to various other idle women, as well as indulging in a certain amount of over-the-wires badinage with attentive men; she lunched with seven other rather smart people at the Savoy; she shopped, she came home and dressed, and talked to her companion; she entertained a married couple, a girl, a middle-aged bachelor and a young bachelor to dinner, and she played with them a mild game of poker until half-past eleven—then she was ready for bed.

In no way could it be called an unsatisfactory day, yet was there really anything satisfactory about it?

"Not one of the people whom I have seen to-day would

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feel one single half-hour of personal sorrow if I were to die to-night ! ” she observed suddenly to Clare who was putting away the cards.

“ Well, Mrs. Hyphon, would *you* feel one single half-hour of personal sorrow if any of them were to die to-night ? ” was the placid but quite logical reply.

“ Quite true, I shouldn’t—but I should if a single one of them felt any warm kindly feeling for me because I *am* Me ! Was there one person who rang me up this morning without regarding me from some utilitarian point of view ?—the possible usefulness might be far in the future or it might at present be quite in embryo, but the idea of it lurked behind every time the women called me ‘dear’ and every time the men threw out a hint of brewing amorousness.”

“ Well, Mrs. Hyphon, in a way I suppose everybody is useful to everybody. If we want to be with a person it’s because we like their society—and it’s always useful to get what we like, isn’t it ? ”

“ Your argument is all right, Clare, but it is far fetched—at least I think so. Now tell me truly—*truly*—” (she got up suddenly, crossed the room and laid both hands heavily on her companion’s comfortable plump shoulders) “—mind and be quite truthful because you won’t wound or hurt me. If I were to die to-night and leave you three hundred a year for life, would you feel one single pang of real *sorrow* ? If I died *without* leaving you anything I believe you would feel it, because as you are such a dear pleasant girl you make this into a pleasant job, and a pleasant job is always worth keeping—but if you were just as well, or better, off by my departure into another world, would you shed one tear of real regret ? Tell me the truth—the horrible, brutal, cruel *truth* ! ”

Clare tried to speak, tried to lie, but white hands pressing down upon her shoulders killed the kindly prevarication before it was uttered.

Her mouth opened a little, but no sound came out of it—she couldn’t say anything with the blaze of Elsa’s eyes searching with blinding penetration into the very roots of her soul.

“ That’s right, my dear, I’m glad you didn’t say it.

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Good night and God bless you!" And for the first time Elsa bent forward and laid a gentle little kiss upon her companion's cheek—for she felt remorseful, quite keenly remorseful on account of what she had done.

It was a mean cruel trick to force a well-meaning and likeable fellow creature into either telling a futile lie or maintaining a brutal silence.

But she wouldn't like Clare any the less for what had occurred and Clare wouldn't owe her any grudge. They would just go on serenely and pleasantly as they had always gone on, but between them there would never again be even the pretence of a pretence.

"Oh! good heaven!—good heaven!" cried Elsa in her thoughts. "If ever it is sent my way to meet a fellow-being of whom I want to think the best that can be thought, let me find some spell which will keep me from realising The Truth! The Truth is so horrible—always—*always*!"

CHAPTER X

TO DO WITH A MAN AND NOT A GHOST

DURING the next three weeks Elsa seemed to be fully occupied in cementing and adjusting the batch of new influences and interests which she had more or less dragged into her life.

To begin with, she had by this time grown quite accustomed to sleeping three nights at one abode and then three nights at another, and the oppressive aspect of solitude in West Passage was gradually wearing away and giving place to the atmosphere of soul-resting tranquillity which she had sought.

And in three short weeks Tim Haven had become the oldest friend of her whole life. It's true that after nearly a month of frequent encounter and long intimate chats he had no more idea as to who she was, where she lived the other part of her life, or what she did, than on the occasion of their first encounter. But this lack of knowledge made no difference to the sympathy established between them—such comfortable sort of sympathy that without effort they called

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each other by their Christian names and when together indulged in long silences without either yawning or trying to make conversation.

And the intimacy between Elsa and her other unseen and unknown friend had also grown apace—in fact the pen-and-paper confidences which she posted off to the North of England were the most expansive outbreaks of her whole life.

Sometimes she wondered at its being possible to tell any human being so much of her inner thoughts, feelings and doings as she told the crippled poet whose more or less faulty verses in a more or less popular magazine had gone right to her heart and set in it the seed of a comparatively comforting philosophy.

She told “A. B.” how she played her violin, and played into it and got out of it all the cauterisingly cruel emotions that were searing her soul—and how she enjoyed her friendship with a dramatic critic on the floor above—and how there was no hope that the blindness of either Love or Happiness would come to dull the painful clarity of her vision.

“I don’t believe it is in me to feel Love” (she wrote to her confidant), “because I don’t believe it is in me to feel amorous passion. I am raging with passion of all sorts and descriptions except that passion which I suppose is the fundamental part of man’s love for woman and woman’s love for man—and that I am convinced I shall never feel. Before any man could become my lover and make me his he would have to infuse into my being the radiant joy of living which, so far, I have never experienced. Never once, I believe, have I been really joyous ; it would be a wonderful person who could make me so, and he and no other would be my lover. . . .”

This was one of her intimate outbreaks to the Poet in the North, but there were many others, and on various other subjects—for, somehow, to this sufferer whom she had never seen Elsa seemed able to “let herself go.”

She felt, too, that he was interested in what she told, also as she couldn’t see him she couldn’t see *through* him.

It was such a rest not to see through somebody !

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One night when Elsa was at the flat in West Passage she was seized suddenly by an unconquerable desire to play the fiddle.

As a rule she left it alone in the evenings—partly in case Tim might be busy and partly because other flat-holders in the house might object. But on this particular occasion nothing else would assuage the restlessness of her spirit. She must let herself go somehow and there was no other way of doing it.

So, with the light switched off, and the window let down, she stood in a narrow streak of moonshine and slashed furiously at the strings—slashed at them and dashed at them till sometimes the sounds produced were harsh and raucous to hideous extent. Then a second later would come mellow sweetness leading up to a passionate throbbing appeal—the appeal of some emotion fighting to break through walls of conventional apathy.

For nearly half-an-hour Elsa played, then, remembering that Tim might be at work and that other residents might be unappreciative, she laid away the fiddle and put on a loose coat and small crushed-in hat.

For she was going out to see Bacon—yes, she would turn to the right, beneath the grey archway leading to South Square, and then she would walk round and round the green lake of grass and watch for the statue of Bacon to come down and do his nocturnal perambulations. For the idea of an afternoon manifestation never had any appeal. If ghosts were ghosts Elsa preferred them to behave in a proper ghost-like manner, and to walk about in the afternoon would be both unsuitable and incorrect.

So Elsa took herself and her turbulent spirit down the worn wooden stairs, out of the ponderous front door and into the moonlight.

“Please forgive me, but I must tell you how wonderfully you play the violin !”

At first Elsa had not the vaguest idea whence proceeded the voice which spoke these words, but after a second, when her eyes got accustomed to the intense gloom of an adjoining doorway she saw the broad shoulders and the blue eyes of a man.

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He seemed to be rather a tall man, and his voice thrilled with vitality.

For a second Elsa felt disinclined to reply, because the most daring and unconventional woman always jibes when suddenly confronted by an opportunity for playing up to her own unorthodox creeds and rules.

And on this occasion Elsa was being spoken to by a strange man who had not been introduced.

A decently bred woman finds it difficult to cope with that, no matter how violently she may play the violin or tear down the veils of all conventional concealment.

“ You mustn’t mind my saying what I think and feel when I have been listening, and it seemed to me that I understood everything which your music cried out to proclaim.”

This time the man must be cut or answered—so Elsa chose the latter course.

“ What did it proclaim ? ” This was a question, and a question demanded an answer, and by demanding an answer she was giving permission for the conversation to be continued.

“ It proclaimed that you weren’t getting half as good a time out of life as you ought to get, and that in consequence your spirit was full of revolt.”

“ You must possess much power of musical penetration.”

“ I don’t know anything about music at all, but we can all of us understand natural sound—and your violin playing is as natural a sound as a bird singing in ecstasy or a hurt animal crying out in pain, and--er—may I walk with you ? You came out to walk, didn’t you ? ”

“ I came out to stroll—to go and meet Bacon’s statue in the Square under that arch—he comes down at night, you know, and wanders round.”

“ Does he really ? Well, I should like to meet him, too. I’ll tell him who I am and why I’m here, and all that sort of thing—he shall have full credentials. What a gorgeous night, isn’t it ? ”

Elsa agreed that it was, and then set out to stroll with a stranger.

And she didn’t feel that this man *wasn’t* a stranger—

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as had been the case with Tim Haven, who became a life-long friend in ten minutes. On the contrary she was acutely conscious of his entire newness and strangeness, and of being enveloped by an influence that was fundamentally different from any she had ever known before.

For she felt extraordinarily gay and reckless and ready for any adventure that might come along, and the weight of much depression seemed lifted off her soul. It was as though she had suddenly become infused with the spirit of elasticity, as though no matter how much she might be dragged down some joyous influence would cause her to bound up again.

Just as the atmosphere which surrounds certain people, churchyards, and empty houses is depressing, so the atmosphere which surrounds certain other people, gaily lighted restaurants and Continental casinos is exhilarating.

Undoubtedly Elsa's new acquaintance diffused an atmosphere of exhilaration.

"In case Bacon should be a stickler for etiquette I had better tell you who I am, so that you can introduce me," he said, as they passed beneath the archway and came upon the lake of grass, which now, silvered by moonlight, more than ever suggested the idea of artificial water surrounded by a stone kerb.

"I can't introduce anyone I don't know—not even to a ghost," replied Elsa, trying to be reticent and spoiling the effort by being flippant.

"Ah! but you will know when I tell you that my name is Edward Arkenson, that I am unmarried, that my age is thirty-five and that I live in a suite of residential chambers known as No. 3 Oak Court, Jermyn Street. That will do to begin with, won't it? Later on will be plenty of time to tell Mr. Bacon how I get my income, and what I do to make a living—it's just the primary details you want to have ready, isn't it?"

This was all said with an air of extreme earnestness and sincerity, and for a moment Elsa felt as though the whole business was real.

Then she pulled herself together, and made herself laugh; and when she laughed Edward Arkenson laughed too—one

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of those full, rich laughs, which do much to dispel many of the petulances and irritation that make women old before they should begin to think about being middle-aged.

It would not be easy to continue making a hobby of petulance and irritability when in the society of Edward Arkenson.

"Please would you mind standing still a moment," he said suddenly, and when Elsa was just thinking how indecorous and common of her it was to be amused.

She obeyed involuntarily, and in the moonlight they faced each other.

"Please look at me," he said. "I want us to know each other and to be very much in sympathy, and that's not possible till there's been some mutual stocktaking. Will you look at me and I'll look at you?"

And she looked—looked to see a face that was fresh-skinned and fair, hair and short up-turning moustache of a light tint, which accorded; a well-shaped curved nose, and a well-shaped curved mouth, and eyes of blindingly brilliant blue.

"You—you've got the bluest eyes I've ever seen!"

No remark could have been more directly personal, therefore no remark could have been more out of place.

But Elsa couldn't help it—for this was almost the first time in her life that she felt impelled to say what she thought.

"And you——" (he came closer and stared at her almost insolently—yet not quite) "you've got the most unforgettable face I've ever seen. You look like your playing. You wouldn't come out well in a photograph—probably you'd give an idea of being coarse and sullen—but in the flesh-and-blood you are most astoundingly attractive, and I am going to make an effort to fill up every moment of my spare time by seeing as much of you as possible!"

Then once again Elsa tried to take herself in hand. She might despise convention, and she might want to be everything which most people were not—but this was too much! She was behaving exactly like a lonely nursery-governess welcoming a "pick-up" found in Kew Gardens or Richmond Park.

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"You won't be seeing me again," she said at last—and never had any remark struck her as being more feeble and inadequate.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because in some things I am most surprisingly well-behaved, and I'm quite, *quite* sure that I could not see or know anybody who hadn't been introduced to me in the ordinary and regular way."

"What do you call the 'ordinary and regular way'?"

"Oh!—er—your knowing somebody I know, and then the somebody arranging for us to meet, and—well, the usual thing, of course!"

"Certainly. Who do you know?"

"Hardly a soul near here."

"Away from here then—it doesn't matter where it is."

"I am not going to tell you *anything*!" This was a sudden resolute decision and she meant to keep to it.

He was silent a moment, then when something made her look up right into his eyes she saw that he was smiling down at her. It was the tenderest and fondest and kindest smile she had ever seen.

"Then I must find out for myself, mustn't I?—at least I don't want to find anything out, I only want to know *you*, and I want to know you more than I've ever wanted anything before. And I shall do it!"

"Will you?"

"Yes, I shall. And you promise to be nice to me when it's done, won't you?"

"Oh! yes, I shall be very nice then."

"That's a bargain then. Now I will leave you to Bacon. This is his night and I don't grudge him his innings—because mine will come soon! Good-night—*au revoir!*"

Then he went—disappeared through the shadows of the arch just as swiftly and silently as any of the Gray's Inn ghosts might have done.

And that was the loneliest moment Elsa had ever known. She left the moonlight and went in.

Green Grapes

CHAPTER XI

TO DO WITH A DISTURBED CONDITION OF MIND

IT is perfectly accurate to state that after meeting and parting from Edward Arkenson Elsa thought of very little else except Edward Arkenson.

The memory of their brief interview obsessed her and the memory of his brilliantly blue eyes blinded her.

All day long it was as though blue eyes were looking into hers—blue, blue eyes—glad merry eyes which must stare happiness into the heart of anyone who met their gaze and held it.

“ I suppose I am thinking about this man because there is no other man who gives me any possible excuse for thinking about him—or if he did give me any excuse it must be the excuse of finding interest in dissecting his methods and speculating as to his motives. But in this man there are no methods to dissect or motives to speculate about. If he did and does want to see me again it must be because it is Me—not my money or my sphere of possible usefulness—but Me, just Me !

This was the way in which Elsa let her thoughts get the upper hand and even though she went back home on the very day after the dramatic and indecorous incident the change of scene did not bring about a change of mental reflection.

For, presumably, she had fallen in love—at last. Every woman does fall in love at last, and when she does it is waste of time and common sense to disregard the fact and to try and pretend that it is not a fact.

It was an odd thing, too, that this Edward Arkenson was exactly the type of the dream-man whom she (Elsa) had seen waiting to hold her in his arms and to teach her everything that she had never learnt before.

Yet he was a stranger to her—the most complete stranger to whom she had ever addressed a single word.

And why had she gone away from Gray's Inn just when

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she would naturally want to remain? Why make it impossible to happen just what she most desired should happen? Why put herself out of the way of seeing the person whom she wanted to see more than she had ever before wanted to see anyone?

Heaven knows what could be the answer to all these questions—unless it were the pitiful perversity of a proud feminine mind!

But Elsa had to go—she felt, somehow, that she would be doing something very brave and sturdy in going and that there would be a tremendous satisfaction in knowing that she had been strong enough to run away from a splendid array of glorious possibilities.

For the mind of Elsa Johnson-Carr was distorted as are the minds of half the clever and more or less brilliant women in the world. She couldn't let matters of any description take their course, she must always be interfering with Destiny and trying her best to spoil the plans of a kindly well-meaning fate.

And so she went away from Adventure and Romance just as, for the first time, they had stopped to take her case in hand.

But the fearless experiment wasn't by way of being a success, for the restlessness of her spirit increased and everything seemed more unsatisfactory than it had ever seemed before. To such an extent, in fact, did she feel out of tune and out of gear that, acting upon Clare's advice, she sent for the doctor.

And this particular doctor happened to be one whose habit it was to commit the unprofessional *bêtise* of saying what he thought, therefore anyone who consulted him must always be prepared to hear what they mightn't wish to hear.

Hitherto he had, as a rule, told Elsa that there was nothing the matter with her.

"I want bromide—I'm sure I want bromide!" she concluded after rattling off a vague but wordy description of her own unsatisfactory condition.

"No, you don't want that," he replied, not even troubling to get out the thermometer and shake down the mercury.

Green Grapes

"What you want, Mrs. Johnson-Carr, is to leave off thinking about yourself and to get married again, if possible."

That's what he said, and though Elsa tried to treat the advice as if it had been made in jest, a ferment of shamed fury raged within her.

What was there more natural to think about? And didn't all people think about themselves, unless so weighed down by the need for thinking about others or getting a living that there was no zest left for personal reflection.

Of course, she thought about herself, and of course she would go on doing so for as long as Herself was worth thinking about!

And as for getting married again—what did he mean? Did he intend to convey that the unsatisfied restlessness of her mental condition was due to more or less physiological causes?—the need for carrying out Nature's scheme of mating was responsible for the present hysterical (of course the doctor diagnosed it as "hysterical") state of her introspective mind?

If that was what the doctor meant, how supremely disgusting!

Yet it was her own fault for consulting a medical man when she should consult—yes, who *should* she consult upon the subject of herself and her own unsatisfactory condition of mind and body?

Not a parson?—no, the whole of her inmost soul and consciousness were so flooded with the fervour of *real* religion that the idea of seeking help from a salaried exponent of an, anyhow partially, mythological Book was grotesque.

For when we believe deeply and truly and trust desperately, there is something curiously akin to insolence on the part of any person who tries to make us better than we are!

"Good" people think we ought to do it, but, poor dears, if they only knew how they harm the Creed which they uphold they would never, never again make the same impertinent mistake.

No, a parson would be of no use to Elsa.

Green Grapes

Christian Science—no, her own will was too definite for seemingly illogical insistence to do any good!

DRINK!

There! the thought came to her again!—came at this very critical juncture, when a new and doubly disturbing element had suddenly come along to add to the turmoil of her soul.

If she could get rid of her frenzied objection to drinking, say, a sane and reasonable quantity of “fermented grape juice,” it might be the means of slightly dulling some of her super-sensitive sensibilities.

The trouble was that she *felt* too much—felt everything too much—and if now a vivid fervent love was going to be added to her sensational diet, heavens! what a nuisance she would be to herself and everybody connected with her.

Poor Clare at Burlford Grange!

Poor Tim Haven at West Passage!

Poor “A. B.” in Cumberland!

What a tiring time these three intimate and patient friends and associates would have to look out for!

* * * * *

“City otor.”

It was less than an hour after the doctor’s visit that Elsa went to the telephone and asked for this number—asked for it so breathlessly and eagerly that the operator decided to keep her waiting as long as possible.

Telephone operators never feel kindly towards subscribers who are breathless and eager.

In due course, however, the required number made a response, and a moment later Elsa was speaking to her uncle.

“Hullo! uncle—it’s I—Elsa!”

“Yes, my dear, I knew that.”

“I don’t know why you knew it—I’m quite sure I’m not the only feminine person who rings you up!”

“Very likely—but the others don’t sound so sure of themselves! Ha! ha!”

“Uncle, you are a libertine!”

Green Grapes

“Tell me those pleasant home-truths when we are alone, will you, my dear? It’s very unlikely that someone is *not* tapping the wires! And what may I have the great pleasure of doing for you?”

“Well, I want you to tell me how to become a normal, sane and sensible human being—that is, I want to cease being a teetotaler!”

“Bravo! Bravo!”

“Yes, bravo-ing is all right, but I don’t think there’s any credit due to me in any way. It’s just that I want a new sensation, and liking wine would be a new sensation. But my difficulty is how to make myself like it, and make myself take an interest in it. Can you help me?”

“Certainly. I can make you *appreciate* wine, and appreciation is the first step towards drinking a reasonable amount of it. Also I can most positively make you take an interest in it.”

“How?”

“By taking you over our cellars. I have been suggesting that you should pay us a visit ever since you were old enough to be intelligently interested in anything, but you never would do it——”

“But I will now—I *will!*”

“Good! When?”

“Could I go to-day?”

“Yes, I could manage to take you over this afternoon.”

“May I come then?”

“Yes, you call for me at the office here at three then we’ll taxi over the bridge to the cellars.”

“I’ll be there. I believe it’s going to be a great thing for me. It may result in my not being such an economical person to take out—I’m a great catch now—intelligent conversation and ginger ale!—but I rely on it making me more human and less penetrating. Till three then—good-bye, dear!”

So she was going to try it! She had tried loneliness and frenzied fiddle-playing, but now with this latest complication of falling in love added to her other nerve-straining experiences she must make a really desperate effort to find some sort of a solace.

Green Grapes

Because *of course* this man with whom she had fallen in love!—or anyhow almost fallen in love!—would prove entirely unsatisfactory and afford great scope for anxiety and disappointment.

Quite possibly she would never see him again (though in her candid heart of hearts she did not think that this was likely) but even if she did see him often and intimately—tenderly and passionately even!—there would, without doubt, arise a condition of things which would be torture for over-acute susceptibilities.

She would either find him out in something, or nearly find him out, or make quite sure that there was something to be found out—so with these potent possibilities in prospect it was well to be prepared with some form of sedative solace.

There was no doubt at all that the lives of various hopeless people were rendered far more endurable by the aid of “fermented grape juice”—not too much of it, not too often—therefore it was wise to at least make an effort at sharing one of the sufferers’ solaces.

Good-bye, ginger beer!

Farewell, lemonade!!

Adieu, lime-juice-and-soda!!!

Welcome Bacchus, god of a thousand thousand joys!!!

CHAPTER XII

TO DO WITH “BIG BERTIE”

“I AM very much gratified, my dear,” observed Robert Carmena as he and his enterprising niece left the City offices and taxied their way to the cellars across the water. “I always like women I’m fond of to be interested in my interests,” he went on rather prosily, “and as I am very fond of you I specially like you to know a little more about the business of Carmena and Hoyce than would be known by the ordinary person who orders a case of port from the wine merchant supplied by us.”

“Well, I intend to know a lot now, Uncle Robert—so

Green Grapes

much, perhaps, that you'll wish you had never let me know anything at all!" Elsa's response was cheery and light-hearted because she felt pleased and exhilarated at the idea of a new experience. "By-the-bye," she went on ingeniously, "I suppose you make huge profits, don't you? For instance, a bottle of Champagne that they charge thirty or thirty-five shillings for at The Carlvoy—I suppose they only cost you about fourpence or sixpence, don't they?"

This was really very trying for Mr. Carmena when one of his grumbles against business in general and his own business in particular was the insufficiency of direct profit.

So he explained to Elsa a great deal that she didn't in the least understand or even want to understand, and while hearing all about "duty paid", and "held in bond at the docks," and other technical details entirely devoid of romantic interest she was overwhelmed by a wave of eager impatience.

She wanted to get there—she wanted to begin—yes, now that she had made up her mind to drink wine, she wanted to begin drinking it!

And delay of any sort always irritated her—and this delay of the taxi being held up in the middle of the bridge was particularly irritating.

It was so hot, too—such a blazing insolently hot day for spring that she wanted to get out of the glare.

The glare and Uncle Robert's technical prosiness, and being held up in the middle of the bridge were particularly trying to the nerves.

But at last they arrived—pulled up in front of a brick archway which suggested the entrance to some legendary robbers' cave.

"Are we here?" asked Elsa when Uncle Robert had paid the taxi-driver and was gently touching her arm to push her forward—forward into the—the—

And then it was that Elsa's mind involuntarily remembered her Tennyson.

"Into the mouth of Hell. . . ."

It wasn't red or flaming, nor were there gusts of smoke

Green Grapes

and the wailing of lost spirits ; but it was dark enough and deep enough to be hell or any other undesirable place which, so far, we don't know anything about.

But directly they passed out of the glare into the cool gloom Elsa experienced a strange sensation of pleasure and relief.

If Hell was like this, Hell must be a pleasant change from being held up in a taxi while wearing unsuitably warm clothes on an unjustifiably hot spring day !

"Good afternoon, Vickers. At last I've persuaded my niece, Mrs. Johnson-Carr, to inspect us and our doings. Can you come round with us yourself ? "

This was Mr. Carmena speaking to a benevolent-looking grey-bearded foreman, with whom Elsa felt sure she was expected to shake hands.

His beard was quite long enough to justify a handshake.

So she shook hands, said something pretty and pleasant, which immediately made her popular with the foreman himself and with a couple of cellarmen who happened to be standing near, and then gave herself up to her own impressions.

First of all a cellar candlestick was placed in her hand—a long wooden handle with a light at the end of it—then, following the foreman and followed by Uncle Robert, she went down a flight of stone steps—down—down into the Cave of Bacchus !

"Ah !—h—h—h ! " Immediately she drew this breath, which was the longest she had ever drawn, while a swift smile of pleasure touched her lips.

It was an odour that reached her nostrils and was finding its way to her brain and her throat and her lungs.

"Pleasant, isn't it ? " said Uncle Robert—for he had heard the long breath and understood it.

"Yes, it's—it's so sweet."

"Of course it is, my dear—sweeter than love's young dream or any unnegotiable thing like that. It's the sherry that you smell, isn't it, Vickers ? "

"Yes, sir, mainly, perhaps, but I think it's from all the wines—it comes right from the heart of the wine, so to speak."

Green Grapes

The heart of the wine!—a picturesque expression, which helped Elsa with her impressions. She could imagine that the glowing red wine might have a passionate heart, and that the tawny amber wine might have a golden heart—and that those hearts might seek out and find her heart and soothe it and comfort it, and put into it a new rest and a new contentment.

Then came what appeared to Elsa as a panorama of endless mystery—unfathomable dark distance—cages upon cages in which wild beasts ought to lurk, but which were in reality empty, full, or partially full, bins—great casks, which appeared like rocks waiting for the beat of an incoming tide—and, most picturesque mystery of all, the hanging fungi which caused all strangers and explorers to recall the fringe-like decorations of stalactite caves and grottos.

All the way as they went something was being pointed out and explained—the need and use of scantling on which the great casks rested after being “fined”—the process of “fining”—the methodical piling up of bottles, neck to reversed end, so that weight and pressure should be distributed sufficiently to prevent breakage—capsuling, tasting, corking—everything, in fact, which Elsa didn’t want to know or see.

But she never showed that she didn’t want to understand it all, and even contrived to make intelligent responses while grasping nothing beyond the general and extraordinarily seductive atmosphere of the place.

Cool!—it was deliciously and restfully cool down here, yet never for a second bleak or shivery; and, underlying the mellow coolness was a stealthy gentle warmth—or it may have been a suggested warmth born in an imagination fired by the restfully enervating yet dangerously exhilarating atmosphere of the vaults.

And certainly Elsa’s imagination was fired by something, because every second some new bizarre idea was born in her brain.

Sitting astride on one of the double butts that was full of inward joy—otherwise holding two hundred and sixteen gallons of costly claret!—she seemed to see the brown

Green Grapes

semi-nude figure of Bacchus swaying from side to side and making pretence that he was riding a fiery steed.

And he smiled at her—and *winked*. It was vulgar of him, but Bacchus—even one born in the imagination—might be expected to wink.

Then when he got off the butt, Elsa could see him in one of the empty bins, pretending to be a caged wild animal, sitting cross-legged and gnashing his teeth, but grinning all the while—and winking. Yes, still winking.

Then next he would appear creeping backwards till when half-hidden by a great vat he would beckon—beckon to Elsa and smile to show that she was going to be his love.

And the cloud-like masses of fungi—which it would be sacrilegious to disturb—what strange shapes they appeared to take! Sometimes the form of an angel, sometimes the shape of an undraped woman, sometimes a swan, a flower, a throne—anything unlikely, unnecessary, unexpected.

“Oh! this is a wonderful place!” Elsa burst out suddenly, and both Robert Carmena and the foreman felt extremely gratified, for though they had grown so used to the eerie environment that a suburban parlour would appear to them neither more nor less inspiring than the cellars, they were nevertheless proud and pleased that the weird attractions of their three hundred-year-old vaults should be appreciated.

“I am glad we appeal to your very vivid imagination, my dear,” replied Mr. Carmena, “and if there was anything else we could shew——”

“——Excuse me, sir, but Big Bertie was emptied yesterday,” interrupted the foreman. “Would Mrs. Johnson-Carr care to put her head inside?”

“Rather a dangerous experiment, wouldn’t it be, Vickers?”

“It might, sir, yes, but you remember how when the Crown Princess of Speedenbale went through the cellars she said that was the most interesting of all?”

“I do remember, Vickers; and I remember that it was some time before the Crown Princess was ready to return to her car. But if Mrs. Johnson-Carr likes to try it——”

Green Grapes

"Of course I'd like to try it, Uncle Robert! What is it? What is Big Bertie?"

"Big Bertie is one of the show sights of our cellars, my dear—a giant vat which holds a thousand gallons of wine!"

"What sort of wine?"

"All sorts are put in there to be blended together and whenever it becomes empty a man, or a couple of men, go inside to clean it out. Big Bertie is getting historic now and we are very proud of his carved exterior which was done by a Polish refugee in the reign of George—er—"

"—the third, sir!"

"Yes, Vickers, of course—George the third. Yes. Big Bertie is quite a personage, isn't he? Look!"

They had been walking forward through the mystic gloom, turning to the right and to the left—then they had stopped, and now all candles were turned so as to throw their light on a great brown vat which appeared almost as large as a small villa residence.

It was a ponderous dignified thing and Elsa gazed upon it with a kind of awe.

"Fine carving, isn't it, madam?" murmured Vickers in tones of gentle pride.

Elsa agreed that it was, and felt fascinated by the design of bulging flowers, bulging scrolls and bulging grapes which covered the entire front of the vat. And there—mixed up with the flowers and scrolls and grapes—was a face—yes, and a figure too—a mocking, grinning face, and a gnarled sinuous figure decked with leaves and grapes—

Bacchus! Of course! The lover who was waiting for Elsa—waiting to make her love him more than she would love the blue-eyed vital man whom she had met in the moonlight!

Bacchus! There, one lean finger—longer than it ought to be and carved with an entire disregard of all anatomical laws—was beckoning—beckoning—

"Now, my dear, are you prepared for a new sensation?" Uncle Robert's voice sounded strangely far away.

"Yes, of course—what is it exactly?"

The head partner of Carmena and Hoyce for a second played the part of Mephisto, and whispered in her ear:

Green Grapes

“ You know why you’ve come ? You want to appreciate and *understand* the mellow pleasures of people who are not abstainers, don’t you ? You will understand if you let Vickers open the manhole for you to put your head inside and draw a long breath ! ”

“ I shall ? You are sure I shall ? ”

“ You couldn’t help it.”

“ Is it the smell of the wine ? ”

“ It is the concentrated odour of nearly every wine that is made—it puts the value of wine before you more than any amount of drinking could ever do ! ”

“ Let me try it now then—if it will make me understand. I—I *want* to understand, Uncle Robert, I *want* to understand ! ”

“ That’s good, very good ! . . . Vickers, Mrs. Carr is ready for her experience ! ”

“ Certainly, sir. Brown ! —” (this call was to a young cellarman who was occupied in tapping a butt) “ —bring the stool for this lady to stand upon and shift up the shutter here.”

Brown came forward with a square wooden stool which he put in front of the giant vat that was standing on trestles and raised some five or six feet from the ground. Then, hoisting himself up on to one of the trestles, he lifted the manhole through which it was possible to creep in and clean Big Bertie’s roomy interior.

“ Now, madam, please ! ”

Uncle Carmena helped his niece on to the stool, Vickers put the candlestick right up to the opening, Brown held the raised shutter—and there—there was Bacchus grinning, grinning and beckoning and growing larger and more lifelike every second—grinning—grinning—grinning !

“ Place your head right inside, madam ! ”

This final direction from Vickers was the last thing Elsa heard—heard as though spoken by some far-away voice, as one hears before going under an anæsthetic—then she bent forward and put her head through the manhole.

Only a few seconds passed before she understood—entirely understood.

Green Grapes

CHAPTER XIII TO DO WITH ENDLESS BUBBLES

IT is difficult to determine as to which of the senses affords the most acute sensation.

Certainly not taste—but sound, sight, smell and feeling run each other close, with sound and smell winning so far as romantic emotions are concerned.

Some passionate song that some voice has sung, some passionate melody that some string band has played—these can both make us see pictures of the past with almost agonizing distinctness.

Yet cannot the scent of June roses, the dangerous odour of syringa when dusk is falling, or the pungency of a never-to-be-forgotten perfume equally stir our souls to the very height of passionate sensation?

Surely, yes—a dearest memory can return to us *via* our nostrils and find them the direct route to our heart.

And so it was with Elsa, who experienced the acme of acute sensation when putting her head into the giant vat inside which brown encrustations exhaled the most violent odour of compressed alcohol possible to conceive.

One long breath and the whole mind and body were steeped in the most intoxicating perfume imaginable.

Elsa swayed suddenly, then she felt that she was smiling—grinning almost like the carved Bacchus on the outside of the vat.

But she couldn't come away yet—it seemed almost as though she never could come away—as though she must for ever stand on a wooden stool with her head inside a world entirely different from the one which held her body!

“Hullo-ullo ! ”

She called out softly and foolishly, for no other reason than to hear what effect would be produced by sound on an empty vat—and the echoes seemed like the chuckles of imps and fairies kept purposely to put intelligent understanding into the minds of misguided teetotalers.

Green Grapes

Misguided ! Heavens ! yes, could any body of people be more misguided ?

Fancy ! losing *this* !—this astounding odour which must be the very breath of Bacchus himself !

Yes, the breath of Bacchus !—why, if Bacchus were nearer still and his grinning lips were touching her lips—and—

But no, the face in the corner there was no longer the impish face of the Wine God. There were two blue eyes—blue, blue—and the fires of love were alight in their depths.

At the back of the vat, in the dome of the vat, at the side of the vat, Elsa could see the face of Edward Arkenson.

Now, it was the only face she could see—and it was coming nearer with lips hungry and eager to find her lips.

She smiled—again she couldn't help smiling at him—then came a rush of self-pity on account of all the wasted abstaining years which had passed away.

Why, to think that during all those years she might have drunk deeply of this amazing odour—at least from the wines which created the odour—and instead she had kept to ginger beer and lemonade !

It was not difficult now to realise how Olga Heamick found consolation as she did find it. No person would long be in need of consolation if once they understood fully the lure of Bacchus. This was the home of Bacchus—the house of Bacchus.

And surely the God of Wine must work hand in hand with the God of Love ! Together they must be allies strong enough to conquer any kingdom !

* * * * *

“Come down now, my dear—you've had enough experience to begin with.”

It was Robert Carmena who spoke and who took Elsa's arm and gently pulled her sideways until it was necessary for her head to come out the same way that it had got in.

But when the black-haired head topped by a smart hat did come out the situation needed careful handling—for Elsa swayed and would have fallen if immediate support had not been forthcoming.

Green Grapes

She was drunk, it wouldn't last long, but just for the moment she was dully and placidly drunk.

Mr. Carmena and his foreman looked at each other and smiled. They had seen this sort of thing before. The Crown Princess had been nearly as bad.

"Well, we won't wait any longer, I think, Vickers: there's nothing more for Mrs. Carr to see, is there?"

"Oh! yes, sir, there's the sampling room. If you remember it was quite a job to get the Princess away from there. I'm sure the lady would like to see that—and to taste some of the wines, perhaps."

Mr. Carmena evidently approved of this suggestion for he gave the arm he was holding a gentle shake, and said:—

"Would you like to go straight back now or to see the sampling room?"

By this time the effect of the fumes had dispersed, leaving little or no result behind except giving Elsa an acute perception of all she had missed.

"I want to see the Sampling Room and to taste the wines," she answered quietly.

Uncle Carmena chuckled and pressed her arm with appreciative affection, for now it seemed that she was becoming worthy to be the niece of a shipper of wines whose cellars—after Crescent Vault at the Docks—were among the largest and most important in London.

"This way," he said—and led her out of the chill mystic gloom into daylight and a normal temperature.

For in the Sampling Room there was sunshine shot in through windows set up near the ceiling and the atmosphere was warm and a little heavy.

"What are they doing?" whispered Elsa, indicating a couple of men at the further end of the room, one of whom was taking wine into his mouth, gargling his throat with it and then spouting it out into one of the small receptacles filled with sawdust which decorated the floor at regular intervals. "He's behaving like a thirsty bird who doesn't appreciate his drink," she added in a whisper of amusement.

"He mustn't appreciate it, my dear—it is his business to taste it, and if he swallowed all he tasted he would soon

Green Grapes

reach a world in which there is no tasting--anyhow of earthly wines!"

"And what are all those?" She pointed to rows of bottles placed at regular intervals along the long narrow tables running down the centre of the room.

"Dock bottles they are called."

"They look like medicine bottles! And that is wine inside them, I suppose?"

"Yes, a different sort of wine in every bottle, so that when the buyers come they can taste and sample anything and everything."

"And can other people taste and sample besides the buyers, Uncle Robert?"

Mr. Carmena rubbed his hands delightedly: at last after years of waiting his niece was going to be a credit to the family—at least to the wine-shipping side of the family!

"If 'other people' mean you, my dear, most decidedly."

It was the colour which made her select that particular dock bottle—for the red of it was riper than the red of super-priceless rubies—it might be the heart blood of some fairy-tale princess or the last blaze of a storm-sun's reflection on the lake.

Mr. Carmena took one of the clean thin glasses which stood on narrow shelves along the walls and poured into it some of the red red wine.

"You may have the satisfaction of knowing, my dear, that you couldn't drink a more expensive wine of this particular kind," he said.

Elsa smiled as she took the glass, and asked no questions. She didn't want to know how much it cost or whether it was port, claret or burgundy.

She was just ready to drink, and she wanted to begin. Yes, she really *wanted* to begin—not only from the point of view of experiment, but because those inhalations inside the giant vat had created within her a new and strangely obsessing desire.

The sensation which she had achieved by means of *smell* she wanted to intensify by means of taste.

She wanted to drink!

Green Grapes

And she drank.

Heaven ! how wonderful it was ! Nothing to sear and burn the inside—only a kindly mellow warmth calming every nerve and tenderly soothing every sense.

She drank slowly—and smiled.

Then the glass was empty.

“ I think—” she began when Vickers came into the room carrying in one hand a gold-topped bottle and in the other a glittering glass of unusual shape.

“ You wish for this, do you not, sir ? ” he said, addressing Mr. Carmena in a tone of assurance which testified to the fact that it was the custom for all visitors to sample this particular champagne—the rarest and choicest which the Carmena and Hoyce cellars could produce.

“ Of course, Vickers, yes. Mrs. Johnson-Carr came here a teetotaler but Big Bertie has taught her a beneficial lesson, and now I’m sure she is ready to do the right and proper thing. Open it, will you—you’ve got a glass for yourself, haven’t you ? ”

Pop !

For the first time Elsa realised (forced herself to realise) the fascination of a sound which hitherto had left her cold, and when she saw ceaseless and endless sparkles rising like a fountain in the centre of the glass she also appreciated the potency of such merry pseudonyms as “ Fizz,” “ Bubbley,” and “ The Boy.”

It was still fizzing, it would never cease bubbling, and surely it was merry and bright as any boy alive and alert with youth’s brilliant and ever restless sparkle.

“ It looks *alive*—more alive than I have ever seen effervescent wine before,” Elsa murmured dreamily.

“ That is the *mousse* from that rough-cut star in the centre of the glass, my dear. Look at it ! Like a little volcano, isn’t it ? or as if there was a miniature diver at the bottom of the glass sending up air bubbles to the surface ? But wine is made to be drunk—not to be looked at ! ”

And with these last words Mr. Carmena raised his own glass and drank easily and uninterestedly as though the occupation was neither novel nor particularly inspiring.

But with Elsa it was different. She drank as she played

Green Grapes

the violin—that is, as though she wanted to get all out of it that could be got—and more!

Up to an hour ago she had been a fierce enemy to “fermented grape juice,” but now she understood and felt its subtle allure.

Through the sense of smell other senses had been reached and now she understood why so large a proportion of the world seeks its solace in what is poured out of a bottle into a glass.

Never for one second did it occur to her that mental suggestion had been responsible for this extraordinary change. Never did she think that because she wished to find rest and solace in what apparently gave rest and solace to others, she had overcome the fervent repugnance of her whole lifetime.

No, she put it all down to the passionate exaltation of Big Bertie. She had set out to become a convert from teetotalism and Big Bertie had done the work for her.

She now found pleasure in swallowing “fermented grape juice”—yes, pleasure, actual pleasure!

“By-the-bye, Vickers, has that order from Moddenham’s been changed to——”

Uncle Robert had suddenly turned to speak business with the foreman, and as he did so Elsa tried to centre her attention elsewhere.

She didn’t want to hear any business—business would spoil the enchantment of the moment.

So, vaguely she looked round for something upon which to rivet her attention, and found it in a box of labels lying almost at her elbow.

“Alto Portura”—that was a dark label printed in white. “Nutty Manana”—this was a red label, and underneath that was a yellow label.

“Vina Amorosa”—the wine of love!

That must be a wonderful wine, and it had a wonderful name—almost the most picturesque name that any wine could have.

Then for the first time Elsa took what didn’t belong to her. She picked up the label and surreptitiously slipped it into her handbag.

Green Grapes

There was no possible reason why she couldn't have asked for it. But she didn't—she preferred to be quite wily and artful, and to take it.

Some day, when the occasion seemed to make its demand, she would ask Uncle Robert to send her a case of Vina Amorosa.

Somebody should drink somebody's health in the Wine of Love !

CHAPTER XIV

TO DO WITH A GUEST AT TEA

" Dear Philosopher Friend,

" I am writing to-day to tell you a great deal more about myself because a great deal more has happened just lately.

" I never realised that so much could happen in a week and that in less than that time one woman could have partially transformed herself into another woman.

" I am half another woman.

" And do you know why ? Of course you don't, so I will tell you—yes, I must tell someone, and only you are perfectly safe—safe because you live so far away and don't know me.

" One reason that I am half another woman is because really for the first time in my life I am disturbed by thoughts of a man.

" He is a strange man, I have only seen him once (in the moonlight), and his eyes are most remarkably blue. His christian name is Edward and—and—well, that's all I can tell you because there isn't anything else to tell. But there will be more—I feel there will be more, and when there is you shall be inflicted to the extent of hearing it.

" And the other reason why I am another woman is that I have changed from an abstainer into a drinker of wine. Already I have taught myself to drink a good deal, but soon I shall take more still.

" In your first letter you told me that only Love and Happiness could dull the wearing torture of a too clear mental vision, but I could not wait for these (which might never come !), so in the meanwhile I tried wine.

" And when I had tried hard enough—Inhaling wonderful wine odours, tasting wonderful wine fungi, drinking wonderful ruby juice and golden sparkles—I found that all my former repugnance had died away and that I was able to find pleasure in swallowing wine.

" Perhaps I shall find pleasure in swallowing spirits, too. I fancy I may do ! I may even become a bona fide drunkard, because

Green Grapes

it is my theory that in the course of evolution everything becomes what it is not. I am evolving—I insist upon evolving—and I was not a drunkard previously!!

"I wonder how you are and what you are doing—yes, I do really wonder, even though I shower upon you details concerning myself and without any real interest to anyone except myself. But it is your own fault, because you told me to do it.

"And I do obey you, don't I? Poor patient Poet and Philosopher!

"As I write now I am sitting by the window in my small Gray's Inn flat. It is three o'clock in the afternoon, and I haven't the least idea what I am doing to do with myself for the rest of the day. I only came back here yesterday after more than a week's absence, and I really don't quite know why I have come back now—unless it may be that I am hoping Edward (the blue eyes, you know) may again try to do what I forbade him to do.

"I practically forbade him to speak to me, because I have been brought up to shy at the idea of knowing a man who has not been introduced to me as the laws of Ceremony and Convention demand!

"This seems difficult to credit, when I do the things which I do do, doesn't it? But I—like all the rest of ill-balanced humanity—only exist to be inconsistent.

"I wonder if you are inconsistent, A. B.?

"I wonder if you would love animals and subscribe to 'dumb friend' charities, while keeping and rearing chickens so that you could have them killed for food!

"I wonder if you would sulk, snap, swear on Sunday, yet refuse to write a business letter which might be of benefit to yourself and other people?

"I wonder if you would sack and shoo out some little servant slut who had 'gone wrong' and be ready to *fête* the mistress of a duke or two, a few earls and a couple of millionaires?

"I wonder if you would cringe at the criminal notion of taking a half-penny stamp out of a pal's pocket book, yet would help to 'boost' shares which you had private reasons for knowing must drop to half their value in less than a month?

"I wonder if—

"No, I won't wonder any more, because I don't really wonder—I have a feeling that you are much less false and petty and self-seeking than the rest of the world.

"Of course, being a human being, you *are* all these to a certain extent, but not much, dear Poet Philosopher, not much!

"Write to me when you've time, won't you, and I'll send you some more heart-outpourings directly there is anything to pour out.

"From

"ELSA JOHNSON."

When Elsa had finished writing and stamping and sealing she threw herself into one of the large mannish chairs

Green Grapes

covered in a restful red-and-purple cretonne, and let her mind become a blank.

It was great rest, was this recently acquired capacity for letting her mind be fallow, and she had only been able to achieve it since learning the lesson taught by Big Bertie.

For with unconceivable rapidity Elsa had taken up the habit of drinking wine with her meals and it might be that the time was not far distant when the stronger fare of spirits would be requisitioned to produce more potent results.

And here—in the haven of solitude, where to get a meal meant to go out for it or to cook it on a gas cooker—“fermented grape juice” was specially desirable.

A biscuit and a glass of wine—or two, or several glasses of wine!—how infinitely less trouble than opening tinned salmon and tinned pineapple or trickling out long trails of condensed milk!

Yes, the glass-of-wine-and-biscuit habit is one undoubtedly calculated to make special appeal to the individual living “on his (or her) own.” . . .

Half-past three! Nearly time for tea!—quite time, in fact, seeing that Elsa’s lunch had been more or less sketchy and mixed up with her breakfast.

She stretched a little, she yawned a little, then instead of going to the kitchen and the gas-cooker she opened one door of the small oak sideboard in which Ralph Oldham had been in the habit of keeping anything and everything.

And from off the shelf behind the oak door she took a bottle and a glass—a bottle which, in company with several dozen more, had come from the Carmena and Hoyce cellars before being dispatched to Burlford Grange and then brought on in a taxi to Gray’s Inn—and a glass at the bottom of which was a roughly cut star.

For when Elsa drank sparkling wine she never wanted to be without the glittering bubbling *mousse*, therefore Uncle Robert had been called upon to provide a couple of glasses exactly similar to the one in which champagne had been served on the fateful day of that first visit to the Carmena and Hoyce sampling room.

Green Grapes

Whenever Elsa wanted a thing she usually contrived to get it at the shortest possible notice.

Therefore, as at that particular moment she was in want of liquid refreshment, the bottle was opened without any delay and the star-bottomed glass filled with golden wine.

Then Elsa drank, drank lightly and quickly as though she appreciated what she was drinking but not as though she yearned to linger over it and revel in the sensations produced.

Up to the present that dangerous lingering and yearning had not begun to manifest itself.

One glassful she swallowed, then just as another was being poured out her attention was distracted by a small knock and a rattle of the letter box.

She went out into the passage and found a letter.

It had just been written because the address was moist and smudgy, and it had just been fastened down because the flap of the envelope was damp.

Elsa looked at the direction, and smiled (Tim Haven's extraordinary caligraphy always made her smile) then she tore the damp flap and read :—

“ There are signs that the chatelaine has returned, therefore I beg to propose that in half-an-hour the third-floor tenant comes up to take tea with the fourth-floor resident. There may be another guest, but one of a congenial variety, who will add to the brilliance of the conversation. I trust to see the third-floor tenant in less than a quarter-of-an-hour.

“ T. H.”

This was rather pleasing because going up to tea with Tim always left the mind satisfied with a sense of comfortable repletion—as though a good mental meal had been taken and in consequence the brain was not, for the moment, grappling and struggling to secure something to think about.

For with Elsa—as with all other uncomfortable women whose mentality is always alert and eager—mental food was more necessary than physical food.

Let such a woman go without lunch or dinner and she is probably all the better and gayer for it, but let her remain without something to think about, to plan, to look forward to, and all sorts of entirely imaginary ailments begin to assert themselves.

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These uncomfortable women must have something to think about, reflect upon, turn over, disagree with or combat. Their mind, spirits and morals would suffer considerably if not supplied with a liberal allowance of mental fodder.

Feminine minds are never quite sane unless stuffed almost to bursting point with absorbing facts, looming possibilities and interesting lies told by other and uninteresting people.

Stoke, and stoke, and go on stoking—this should be the motto for every restless and temperamental woman when dealing with her own mind.

She can't cram in too much.

So Elsa decided to accept Tim's invitation—a decision which caused her to admit drinking a third glass of wine after she had swallowed the second, and to change her loose rest gown for an almost equally loose coat-frock.

She looked well in this particular coat-frock of dull dark grey and while mounting the stairs to the next floor she suddenly found herself hoping that the unknown guest would be ready to appreciate her personal appearance.

This particular coat-frock made her look almost absurdly young—she would like this appearance of attractive immaturity to be observed and appreciated.

Tim never appreciated anything because he never observed it—or it may be more accurate to say that he never *seemed* to observe it.

Anyhow whatever way it might be he never talked clothes or complexions or hats, so at times it was necessary to call in outside help.

Elsa hoped the other guest would talk about intimate personal details which would make her even more interested in herself than she was at the present moment.

On reaching the top floor it was to find "the oak" hospitably open and the inner green door slightly ajar.

"May I come in?" she called out without knocking.

"That, madam, is what I wrote and asked you to do!" responded the voice of Tim.

"Well, here I am doing it!" And she did it—walked into the narrow gloomy passage and across to the door of the sitting-room, where she was met by Tim, Tim holding a kettle in one hand and a jug of milk in the other.

Green Grapes

"I am afraid I can't greet you with due ceremony because—er—well, just for the moment both hands are full," he said with his usual quaint and rather attractive hesitancy of speech.

"That doesn't matter—we can get through extra hand-shaking later on," replied Elsa putting into her voice the note of warm "palliness" which made her friends with all men who didn't aspire to be her lovers.

"Then come in, dear madam—" (she almost went in) "—and—er—" (she quite went in) "—er—let me introduce to you a sincere appreciator of well-blended China tea. Mr. Edward Arkenson—Mrs. Johnson!"

CHAPTER XV

TO DO WITH A KISS NOT KISSED

UNLIKE most dramatic moments this particular one did not fall flat.

Elsa felt annihilated, but as, after performing the ceremony of introduction, Tim immediately took his kettle and milk jug to the kitchen, there was no one to witness her annihilation—at least only the blue-eyed man who had caused it.

"Please praise my skill and perseverance," he said.

"Yes, I—I will when I've recovered from the shock," replied Elsa flippantly, but a little nervously.

This blue-eyed stranger was the only man in the world with whom she had ever felt nervous. And she had the uncomfortable idea that he knew it.

"Don't regard it as a shock—try hard to imagine that it's a pleasant surprise," he muttered softly—softly almost as a lover would speak.

"Yes I—I'll try," answered Elsa with a smile—the sort of smile that is very binding, very linking and very human. No woman could smile like that except at a man she loved or was going to love.

Then Tim came into the room, and with him superlatively blended China tea and witty conversation.

Green Grapes

Elsa herself didn't talk a great deal, but what she said was just what she should have said to supply the right touches of illogical feminine inconsistency and to create need for masculine explanation and correction.

They both explained to her and they both corrected her, and the more they did it the more they liked her, or loved her, or were prepared to love her, as the case may be.

And while the two men talked Elsa leaned back and formed definite impressions of Edward Arkenson.

These impressions were that he could gain either the love, friendship or affection of anyone he wished—that his easy, almost happy-go-lucky manner was deceptive, and that he was a man of iron will and almost cruel determination—that in all probability he made a great many people think he liked them much better than he did like them—that his capacity for throwing off anything and everything (annoyance, grief, undue exhilaration, passion, perhaps even love itself !) was extraordinary—that one part of his heart belonged to a merry teasing schoolboy—that another part of his heart belonged to a relentless judge who would never forgive—and that a person might know him for half a lifetime without knowing half there was to know about him.

Tim Haven evidently found him exceptionally congenial, and he obviously appreciated Tim's dry humour. But it was apparent that their acquaintance was in the earliest possible stages of development.

"The fiddle has been very mute lately," observed Tim during an easy and restful break in the conversation.

"I hope it has, seeing that I've been away. I should be considerably annoyed if Mrs. Stockley suddenly neglected charing for music," answered Elsa merrily. "And," she added with a very serious head-shake, "it must be a tremendous relief to you when I am away—you must be able to write much more and much better!"

Tim screwed up his eyes behind his spectacles, and pondered.

"I'm not so sure," he said at last, "that your music hasn't developed from an irritant into an emollient. I rather think it has, and that I can do better work when I interrupt my thoughts by wondering when you are going to

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leave off. During this last absence of yours I believe I experienced an almost perpetual hankering for sound."

"Well," broke in Edward Arkenson, "that points to one thing—that Mrs. Johnson mustn't have any more absences, and that she must stay here all the time and make you wonder when she is going to leave off playing. It will have to be arranged like that, won't it, Mrs. Johnson?"

"I am afraid it can't be—er—"

"Oh! are you like myself—an inveterate week-ender?"

"Yes—or—er—or week-middler or week-beginner—or just whichever I think I will."

"Ah! you are lucky to be able to arrange things like that. A business toiler like myself can only spare his Saturday-to-Monday or Friday-to-Tuesday, as the case may be."

Elsa nodded and made no reply, and while making no reply wondered where and with whom those week-ends were spent—also wondered if he was wondering what she did with her life when not at West Passage.

It was rather piquant to think how each one was wondering about the other.

Yet it would be nice not to wonder, and that's when the lure of "fermented grape juice" came in—to stop speculation and introspection which are the main factors for spoiling the best hours of certain people's lives.

For another half-hour they smoked and talked and even permitted one or two blessed moments without either smoking or talking, then suddenly Elsa saw that with polite furtiveness Tim was glancing at the clock.

"You are due somewhere? You've got to do something?" she cried, also looking at the clock to show that she had intercepted his own glance.

"Well—er—not quite immediately—I am dining with some people before the theatre, so I must dress and—"

"—and you shall dress right away and take plenty of time making yourself look extra smart and extra attractive! I am going now—this minute. Good-bye—and thank you for nice tea and nice sandwiches! Good-bye, Mr. Arkenson!"

And when Elsa turned to the blue-eyed man with whom

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she had quite definitely fallen in love she did not even hold out her hand.

But there was going to be no adieux so far as he was concerned.

He only smiled, looked a look that seemed to say, "don't be silly!" and then turned to Tim.

"Good-bye, Haven. I'm going to follow Mrs. Johnson down the stairs to see when I can induce her to give me a chance of hearing the violin which, so far as you are concerned, has changed from an irritant into an emollient. Good-bye—don't forget you are dining with me early next week—we'll telephone and fix the day. Good-bye!"

Then the next moment they were going down the stairs in single file, and Elsa knew that Fate was walking behind her.

When she reached the third floor she stopped.

"This is my destination—good-bye!" she said.

He looked at her with blue eyes that simply danced and beamed with mischief.

"May I say good-bye—at least *au revoir*—when I come out?" he said in a voice soft and mellow as a creamy cordial.

Elsa gave in at once. There was nothing to be gained by making pretences, particularly when she herself found all pretences so detestable—it would be so absurd seeing through herself!

So she pulled open "the oak" which had been left ajar, put the key in the latch of the green inner door, and walked in.

Edward Arkenson followed—into the passage and into the sitting-room.

"How pleasant it is to think that now we have been respectably and conventionally introduced, isn't it?" he said looking at her in that particular way which made her feel that for the first time in her life she was loved—or anyhow going to be loved.

"Yes—er—how did you—er—have you known Tim Haven long?" replied Elsa rather stupidly. No other man had ever before made her feel downright stupid and unintelligent.

Green Grapes

" You know, at least you guess, I haven't."

" How—er—how is it then ? "

" Didn't you mention that you knew a man in the same house as yourself ? "

" *Did I ?* "

" You did. And wouldn't a very little private detective work and tipping find out which man ? And when the man was found would it be stupendously difficult to discover to which clubs he belonged ? And when the clubs were discovered wouldn't it be comparatively easy to drop on a member with whom one happened to be acquainted—or anyhow someone who knew a member—and then to dig on and push and dig till at last Haven himself was reached and introduced ? And when once introduced should it have been an insurmountable difficulty to make oneself more or less congenial ?—and then to get an invitation round to his chambers in order to look at some particular edition of some particular book ? Surely all this didn't require much talent ? A little patience, perhaps, but not talent ! "

Elsa shook her head and laughed weakly and perhaps just a little tenderly.

" I should think you would be one of those people who it would be quite impossible to get the better of ! " she said.

" *I am !* " By this time she was sitting down, and Arkenson stood over her as he agreed vehemently with her assertion. " Nobody *has* ever got the better of me yet. What I mean to do, I do. I am most insolently sure of myself and in this respect my conceit is tremendous."

" Conceit ! I've always thought that I detested a conceited man more than anything in the world."

" You won't detest me ; besides, you won't realise that I am conceited until you look for it. But you will feel how ~~sure~~ I am of myself—you can't help feeling that."

" But it may be that we shall never know each other well enough for me to feel anything about it."

" Don't say things like that when you know so thoroughly well that you don't think them ! You realise quite well that you and I are going to know each other better than we've ever known anybody before. And now the fiddle—will you

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play me something and let me hear at closer quarters all I heard when I was standing outside the window?"

"I don't want to play—"

"Oh! you do because—well, because I want you to. There will be time for you to play before we go out and dine."

"We? Dine?"

"Yes—together. We are going to dine somewhere together—that is the best way of beginning to know each other as we are going to do. There is your violin, isn't it?—please!"

Elsa made no further remonstrance. In point of fact she really rather wanted to play, because seething within her was something she wanted to let out—something which reminded her of the turbulent silver bubbles rising from the roughly cut star at the bottom of the wine glass.

So she took the violin out of the case, stood with her back to the window, rested her warm creamy chin on the polished wood and slashed her bow across the strings.

Lord! how she played! How audacious it was!—almost indecent—how she hacked her emotions on the catgut!—how she tore at it, dashed at it, defied it, crashed it!

"I am ready for life!—I am tired of finding everything unsatisfactory—I am going to make a bold and dangerous dash to get something out of existence—something in my soul is hurting me and burning me and searing me—it must be a cancerous growth of the soul—I must lull it and still the pain—I mustn't let the pain interfere with love—I must fight to get away from myself, fight, fight, fight!—and oh! the sweetness that love could bring!—like a bird soaring to heaven the soul would soar in ecstasy, and if there was hurt or doubt the dreamy gentleness of wine would soothe everything—earth would be forgotten and hope would rise higher—higher—higher—"

On a far-away harmonic the melody ended and as Elsa's hands—bow in one, fiddle in the other—dropped to her side her face was very pale, while her breath came in swift short gasps. It was the climax of a tremendous emotion.

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Then she felt that someone had come up behind her, that strong fingers were gripping either arm and that the warmth of human breath was touching her forehead.

"Are you ready?" whispered Edward Arkenson.

Instinctively she knew what he meant.

"No—no—"

"But you asked for my kisses—every note you played was a demand that they should hold you and close you and madden you and make you understand what Nature meant all women to understand. You asked—you asked!"

"But not yet—not *yet*!" The pleading was almost pitiful.

"Then if not *yet*, where you have been!" And the fiddle which was lying inert amidst the folds of her skirt was lifted for a man to lay full hot lips on the warm wood just where the player's chin had rested.

Elsa watched those kisses, watched them almost introspectively and analytically, saw the drawing-in and expansion of the lips, saw the clinging and lingering upon the wood—and as she watched came the bewildering thought of when her mouth should receive what was now being given to her violin!

It would be a tremendous time and if she could only joy in it unhampered by doubts and suspicions life would indeed be worth while.

"There! soon it will be you instead of a warm place where your chin has rested!" (Heaven! had he divined those fervent thoughts which had been leaping through her brain?) "And now you must get ready at once—at once—or else things will be rushed more than you consider quite artistic. For that is the real reason that you won't be quite natural with me and won't let me be quite natural with you—just because you think it wouldn't be artistic. But it doesn't matter—time passes with comforting speed. Go and get a hat on, and let us discover that we are hungry."

And she obeyed—went straight to the bedroom, put on a young sort of hat with a down-drooping brim and then went back to where he was standing.

"I am ready," she said—and this time there was challenge

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in her eyes. For she had watched those lips being pressed upon the violin.

But Edward did not respond to the challenge.

She had said "not yet" and he had accepted the decree.

It was no use two minutes afterwards for her eyes to say "Now!"

Matters should be timed as he thought best.

But, good lord, he wanted to!—blazing heavens! *how* he wanted to!

CHAPTER XVI

TO DO WITH A PERFECT EVENING

THE evening was one unmarked by a single flaw of any description.

They taxi-ed to the West End, dined off exactly what they fancied, sitting in a secluded corner of a gay and absurdly expensive grill-room, then adjourned to the Winter Garden Lounge for coffee and liqueurs.

And this was the first occasion on which Elsa had tasted that very babyish, but very pungent, liqueur called *Parfait Amour*. Anybody must realise—or think they realise—that if a few sweets known as "clove balls" were melted down, flavoured with raw rum and tinted with cochineal, *Parfait Amour* must be the result.

But absurd and obvious as the liqueur might be, Elsa found it tremendously attractive, and as sip after sip trickled down her throat her own vision seemed to grow coloured like the stuff she was drinking. . . .

And so well they got to know each other without either telling the other one single satisfactory or reassuring detail.

So far as Edward knew of Elsa, she was a conscientious research worker who put in a certain amount of time at her Chambers in West Passage; and so far as Elsa knew of Edward, he was a person who had something to do with electricity and who left his flat at No. 3 Oak House, Jermyn Street every week-end.

But though lack of confidence is as a rule a bar to com-

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plete sympathy, it is also a stimulator of the thoughts, and half-a-dozen times during the evening Elsa found herself wondering the most wildly extravagant things.

Of course, everything might seem what it did seem, while all the time there were other despoiling facts and circumstances which—

There it was again ! She was seeing through her companion's apparent candour (or partial candour !), when in all probability there was nothing at all to see through.

So she drank just a little more champagne than many very abstemious women would drink, and then the wonderings began to disperse.

At half-past nine they had taken their places in the Winter Garden, and at half-past ten they came out.

Then Edward asked ;

“ Do you want to go anywhere to be amused ? ”

“ Do you mean the second half of a music hall ? ”

“ Yes, something like that.”

“ It wouldn't amuse me—it would bore me pitifully.”

“ You can't be sure.”

“ I can be quite sure. Any place of entertainment which one can turn into just when one likes always sets itself out to be funny and to give its audience '*a feast of perpetual amusement*,' or '*one long roar of laughter*'; therefore as I detest being amused or being made to witness performances which produce roars of laughter, I prefer to stay away.”

“ Why don't you like being amused or being made to roar with laughter ? ”

“ I suppose it is really because I've got a warped and soured soul. I like to think it is because I've got a high-class and superior soul, but I expect it's the other ! ”

“ Yes, I expect it is ! ” They both laughed and felt insensibly that this little flash of “ cheek ” had drawn them very near together. Then Edward went on speaking, but this time with more force and earnestness. “ But it's a bad habit to get into—this artistic craving for depressing influences. It affects the health in time and there is no way of curing it if it goes too far.”

“ Isn't there ? I don't agree with you—I believe there

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is a way ! ” She was thinking of a roughly cut star and endless silver bubbles ! ”

“ You mean love, of course.”

“ I wasn’t thinking remotely of love ! ” She flushed, and flashed this out at him. A woman hates a man to catch her thinking about love.

“ You ought to have been, then ! But you will be soon. When we are lovers you will never leave off thinking about love, because I shall so surround you with it and cover you with it and make you joy in it and revel in it that you will never leave off thinking about it. . . . Well, if you won’t go anywhere I had better take you home. We might go to my place for drinks and chocolates, but as you say ‘ not yet ’ it might be wiser to wait. . . . Taxi ! ”

His audacity was tremendous, but to Elsa it was extraordinarily attractive. She had never met anything like it before, and to snub it would be like snubbing the confiding impertinence of a pigeon who alights on your shoulder and proceeds to peck at the artificial cherries in your hat.

Audacity—presuming it is thoroughly unforced and entirely fearless—is one of the most fascinating traits which can be possessed by human being, animal or bird.

The man who makes love to us audaciously—we adore !

The cat who refuses to budge when we want to put our head on our own pillow—we worship !

The sparrow who will not let us have our gold club tea in peace, and who will persist in cadging for crumbs—we love his brown featheriness to distraction !

Man or beast who is audacious may be sure of just as much affection as ever he wants—provided, of course, that he is a sufficiently young and sufficiently attractive man or beast.

Old audacity or hideous audacity is pitiful.

When Elsa and Edward got in the taxi, neither of them spoke for some time. It was as though both were waiting to see if some great moment was at hand, and for some sign from the other.

Then Elsa pulled herself together and tried to talk with the easy *bonhomie*—which made her comrades with Tim Haven and all other men who were not her lovers.

Green Grapes

But it didn't come easily, for two people who are destined by Fate to become lovers never make a successful pretence of *camaraderie*.

"To-morrow you'll let me call and take you for a run in the car, won't you?" said Edward, when a second spell of silence had been lasting a full moment.

"I don't think I can to-morrow—I might on Saturday or Sunday," replied Elsa, having no reason whatever for putting off the suggested arrangement till three days later.

"Ah! I shall not be in London on Saturday or Sunday, so it must be before that. It had better be to-morrow. I'm sure you aren't doing anything that you can't put off!"

"How very sure you are about other people's business, aren't you?" This was said pertly, and it brought lightness to break through the heavy slumberous atmosphere which surrounded both their senses.

"Very—when I want to be. And I want to be sure about your business, for the reason that the more sure I am about your business the more sure I shall be of you. But I am very sure of you already."

"Are you? I wonder why that is?"

"It's because I'm so intensely sure of myself and how I feel about you, and no man ever feels about a woman as I feel about you without being sure of her. It he were not sure he wouldn't trouble to feel! Ah! here we are at the gate—we'll get out and walk through."

Elsa agreed, and for a moment contrasted his methods with those of other men. Other men would have said "shall we get out and walk through?"—he said "we *will* get out and walk through."

The likeable audacity never seemed to leave him for a moment.

When they had rung the bell and the porter had admitted them, Edward observed :

"Don't you feel like a relic of history whenever that ceremony is performed?"

"Yes, perhaps; but I feel most of all like a fly-away pigeon returning to its cage. It is a strangely comforting

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sort of feeling, and if ever I come to live here altogether it will be partly for the sake of never being able to come home after nine without having to be let in. It seems as if someone were caring for me and protecting me. I don't suppose porters ever do care for, or protect, the people they let in, but it's pleasant to pretend they do ! ”

“ What a medley of exaggerated thoughts you have in that beautiful head of yours ! ”

“ My head's not beautiful ! ”

“ Oh ! yes, that black hair is very beautiful.” By this time they had passed beyond the shadows of the entrance gate and were standing in a bath of silver moonlight, so that when Elsa looked up at him she seemed to see with extraordinarily vivid clearness everything that his face expressed. No sunlight, no arc lamp could reveal all that seemed to be revealed by the brilliant silver of the moon.

And in his face and his eyes she could see that he *did* think her hair was beautiful, and that her thoughts were quaint and delightful, and that she herself was all and everything that he wanted a woman to be.

Just for that sweet, brief moment of moonlight revelations she could see all that.

If only she could never see anything else ! . . .

“ Are you going to ask me in to have a smoke, or is it still ‘ not yet ’ ? ”

He was standing close beside her, and she could feel the strength of his personality to such an extent that involuntarily her fantastic mind suggested the idea of standing in a great warm bath charged with electricity.

Once she had taken a course of electric baths, and had found it the most satisfying experience of her life.

Should she ask him in ? If she did, they would become lovers before he left ! Was she ready for them to become lovers, or would longer dalliance enhance the joy of mutual lovers, or would rapidly ripened passion ? Were her lips ready for his kisses ? Yes, they were ready, but—but—of course, she knew nothing really about him except the information which he and her own intuition supplied ! And both might be wrong—probably were wrong, because, after all, a man— Now, there was her mind busily at

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work again, diving and delving and seeing through something which at present was no clearer than a pane of ground glass ! It was a pity that her mind wouldn't let her give herself up to her heart and her impulses !

Should she ask him in to-night ? Should she ? If only there could be some sign to—

“ *DRIVE SLOWLY.*”

They had reached the curved archway beneath which it was necessary to pass in going from the Square to the Passage, and just above it was a painted direction.

“ *DRIVE SLOWLY.*”

Was that the sign which she had wanted ?

“ Well, am I going to be asked in ? ”

“ Not to-night—look ! ” And she pointed to the painted direction above the arch.

He laughed softly and tolerantly, then for a moment took her hand.

“ I shall call for you with the car at two to-morrow—we can run down somewhere into Surrey and get back in time for dinner. Good night.”

He was gone. Once again the shadows had taken him, and Elsa was left alone staring at a painted sign set up above a curving archway.

“ *DRIVE SLOWLY.*”

She had been a law-abiding citizen and had followed the direction.

Slowly she was driving the Car of Love on the road to Olympian Plains of Joy !—no exceeding the speed limit no rushing past danger signals on the way.

“ *DRIVE SLOWLY.*”

CHAPTER XVII

TO DO WITH THE EMBRACE OF BACCHUS

“ *THE oak* ” was shut, the green inner door was shut, and Elsa was inside.

She had “ driven slowly ” and now after the exhilarating experience of being with the one individual who appealed

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to her in every way that it is possible for a man to appeal to a woman, she was surrounded by the solitude on which she had relied as a panacea for turbulent and disquieting thoughts.

And this was just the time when she didn't want solitude—when she wanted someone to whom she could tell every absurd and exaggerated emotion that was rioting within her.

She wanted to talk about Edward Arkenson, to dissect him and to speculate about him.

And there was much to speculate about—very much.

For instance, so far as she (Elsa) could remember, she had never mentioned Tim Haven to him. She had never mentioned him to anyone—except on paper to the crippled poet whom she had got into the habit of deluging with confidences of every description which she would hesitate to inflict upon some visible companion who would yawn and fidget while she gave them—and perhaps to Clare Carter who—

No, no, she had never mentioned him to the nice young woman with the healthy mind who was now playing the part of deputy mistress at Burlford Grange.

Therefore as she had never mentioned Tim Haven to anyone, how could Edward Arkenson know that she was acquainted with him?

It almost looked as though her witty journalistic friend on the top floor and the blue-eyed stranger had been in league from the beginning!

Suppose it was that they knew she had a certain amount of money and wanted to get it out of her!—to put into some theatrical enterprise, perhaps—and, after agreeing that the best way of getting a woman's money was to make love to her, Arkenson had been deputed the task of arranging a romantic start-off, to be followed up by a supposed introduction from Tim Haven and--and—well, of course the idea might be a trifle far-fetched, but not very!

Because—with many exceptions—most attractive men (nobody could be more attractive than Edward Arkenson) are out to get hold of some woman's money. That is the only way of putting their attraction to good account.

Green Grapes

And in speculating about Edward Arkenson one could speculate about his way of living and his—his—

God ! what could one *not* speculate about if only one allowed full play for the demoniacal efforts of a too clearly-seeing mind !

Hadn't she (Elsa) almost prayed that if ever happiness came in sight her own mental vision might be quieted and lulled ?

And now here she was—heavens ! it was maddening, these things, which her mind was trying to make her think !

How could she stop it ? Who could make her stop it ?

Why surely—yes—“Big Bertie” could stop it all in three moments of rapturous inhalation !

But “Big Bertie” wasn't here—no, there was no giant vat in a suite of Gray's Inn chambers ! Not a necessary article of furniture !

Yet “Big Bertie” was not indispensable, for Olga Heamick did without the wine-essence odours breathed in through the manhole of a giant vat ! She didn't inhale—she *drank* !—and when she drank there was complete forgetfulness of all that made her life merely a rehearsal for playing a part in Hell !

Yes, Olga Heamick *drank* !

* * * * *

It was twelve o'clock when Elsa opened the door of the little oaken sideboard set in the niche beside the stove, and took out a bottle and a glass.

Her eyes were sparkling and her lips were smiling, as sparkle the eyes and smile of the lips of a woman hurrying to keep a rendezvous in her lover's arms.

And Elsa was hurrying to a lover's arms—she could see him over there in the corner, waiting for her !

His long skinny brown finger was beckoning, he was grinning and his pointed fang-like teeth were gleaming, and the bunches of grapes dangling over his ears quivered every time he shook his head.

Her lover Bacchus—perhaps the most faithful lover any

Green Grapes

woman can have!—was waiting to crush her in an embrace that would blot out the memory of all things which hurt.

Edward Arkenson might be her lover in the future, but to-night Edward Arkenson was away and Bacchus was there!

To-night it should be Bacchus!

And this wine was red—the ruby juice which glows and warms—and it was old and costly and worthy to delight the palate of an exigent connoisseur!

Such a pity to waste it on a young woman out to try new and emotional experiments!

So Elsa drew the cork—a fine resonant “pop” she achieved—and filled a glass.

But as this particular wine was red and still the star at the bottom didn’t produce an ever-bubbling result.

That was a pity, because Elsa loved the silver bubbles.

However, the red, still wine was poured out, so she drank it, and dissected her every impression and sensation while the mellow, pungent stuff trickled down her throat.

Then she filled the glass again—and again—and began to realise that wine was a wonderful thing.

The Bible—yes, the Bible was always saying something about wine, wasn’t it?

“*Wine maketh glad the heart of man!*” That was a quotation which old Barnstable had once ventured to make when jibbing at his mistress’s Apollinaris or lemonade proclivities.

And it was true, too—at least, it was undoubtedly true where Woman was concerned. For now there was warmth inside her body, while a warmth, a glad warmth, seemed to be gathering round her heart.

If Edward Arkenson had only been here now she wouldn’t have said “not yet”—but that didn’t matter he would be here to-morrow, and to-morrow is always of more vital interest than to-day.

It was joyous to be just beginning a love-story as she was doing now, and with a man who couldn’t be improved upon. Edward knew Tim Haven—at least he had got to know him—so that part of the business was quite orthodox, and as he possessed a car he must be more or

Green Grapes

less affluent, and an affluent man is never likely to be self-seeking. Apart from the affluence itself, he is more worth while—less on the look out for possible benefits—more ready to regard love from a sentimental point of view.

It was joyous to think of seeing Edward to-morrow—of going with him to where spring trees and fields were green and where new-born flowers were giving to the world that radiant beauty which only extreme youth can give! . . .

Yes, to-morrow would be full of joy, and to-night already *was* full of joy!

And it should be fuller still—the glass—the bottle—no, not the same bottle, because still red wine sent forth no silver bubbles, and those ever-twinkling bubbles were so gay and flippant and like the laughter of youth, which laughs while it hasn't the remotest idea what it is laughing about.

Another bottle—from the other shelf—where were the nippers to cut the wire?—ah! Here, in company with a salad spoon and fork and a hare's-foot handled paper knife! . . .

Click!—the wire was kind and yielding, as though glad and ready to remove its restraining influence. . . .

Pop!!

A splendid one that!—half-way up to the ceiling—just a fringe of foam round the top of the bottle, but no vulgarly exuberant frothing over.

Swizz—z—z—z—into the glass, and now the star doing the duty it was cut to do!

Sparkle, sparkle!—bubble, bubble!—go on, little invisible diver down at the bottom of the glass, send up your silver bubbles all the time!

Swizz, swizz—bubble, bubble—sparkle, sparkle—

Ah! it made the tongue tingle, and the throat tingle and even the teeth tingle—almost a touch of pain, but, like many other forms of transitory pain, a keen, potent pleasure!

One glass Elsa drank—two glasses—then with the third filled to the brim and the restless quicksilver bubbles

Green Grapes

rising all the time, she drew towards her writing-pad and pencil, and began to scribble.

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" Dear Poet Philosopher,

" I am writing to you now—at the very moment when—for the first time in my life—I am *drunk*!

" Yes, I am drunk with wine! It is a great achievement, and the man with whom I am going to have a tremendous love affair has helped to bring it about.

" And it's great—it's great!

" Yes, it's because of him. I have just parted from him and I said 'not yet'—and when I got inside I felt lonely and regretted saying 'not yet,' and so I opened two bottles, so that my loneliness and regret should both pass away!

" And they have passed away, and I see things now in a right light—in the most radiant glorious light you could possibly imagine.

" I am so truly happy.

" And because I am so truly happy to-night I mean to keep it up and to call in the aid of my good friend Bacchus whenever things are black and ugly.

" I have been thinking of Bacchus as a lover, but now—as I've got a real charming lover with the bluest eyes that a bit of sky ever dropped down—I am going to think of him as a friend.

" You are one friend, someone called Clare Carter is another, Tim Haven (on the top floor here) is another, and now Bacchus is another.

" Do you like Bacchus's's's (difficult to make possessive, isn't it?) curls? If there were lots of Bacchuseseseses (difficult to pluralise, isn't it?) how drunk we should all be!

" My Bacchus is watching me while I write, and now he insists that I must stop for a moment—just to drink your health, dear Poet Philosopher! . . .

" I've done it, and filled the glass again and now the silver bubbles are bubbling more merrily than ever and waiting to tingle on my lips.

" I wish, dear friend, you were here to enjoy the tingling with me, because now I am beginning to be convinced that anyone who misses the *comfort* of drinking wine is ignoring one of the main compensations which a beneficent Providence puts at the disposal of poor harassed humanity.

" I've 'taken to drink' (horrible phrase, isn't it?) quite deliberately, and I mean to go on with it.

" Good-night, kind friend, who sympathises without arguing—or if you do argue, who argues in the right way!

" From

" ELSA JOHNSON."

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Green Grapes

When Elsa had finished writing she leaned back in the deepest of the deep chairs and smiled, and watched the endless bubbles rising and ever rising in the glass which she had filled.

Then she drew the glass towards her--and after a moment the bubbles were no more!

She had swallowed them.

"Bacchus," she murmured softly, "I believe I love you better than Edward—come to me!"

And the Wine God came and folded her in his restful embrace--the embrace which brings death, dissolution, disgrace and despair!

CHAPTER XVIII

TO DO WITH BIRDS IN A WOOD

THE next morning Elsa awoke late, and with the pleasantly sensuous feeling that she didn't want to get up.

The headache which should have been with her wasn't there. It's true that her eyelids felt just a little stiff and heavy, and her throat a little dry, but otherwise there was nothing to give any reminder that on the night before she had lain unconscious in the brown, sinuous arms of Bacchus.

But she remembered it, and with a distorted sense of pride which people do feel when conscientiously accomplishing something they have never done before.

"I was drunk last night!"

She murmured this definite statement to herself and found a certain satisfaction in making it. It really *was* rather clever of her to get drunk for the first time in such a very comfortable and satisfactory fashion!

And what a comparatively small experience it was, after all! Of course, the falling to sleep in the chair and the waking up at three o'clock to fumble her way into bed were not quite pleasant experiences, but easily these could have been averted had she known a little more about the game.

Green Grapes

Strange it was, too, that after years of almost fanatical antipathy against drink she should now slip into the habit without a single pang of disgust.

She didn't feel in the least disgusted with herself and she was quite ready to repeat the experience whenever circumstance and inclination called for a repetition.

* * * * *

Elsa took the customary light breakfast in bed, got up, dressed slowly—as seemed in accord with the pleasant sense of languor which pervaded her whole being—telephoned for lunch to be sent in from the small restaurant just outside the gate and then awaited the arrival of the man and the car.

And they were not long in arriving—in fact Elsa had hardly lighted her after-lunch cigarette when, through the open window, came the rumbling crunch of a motor being brought to a halt.

She looked out.

“Ready?” called up Edward Arkenson.

“Quite ready!” she answered blithely as a girl.

“Come down, then.”

“I will!”

That was all.

A close-fitting hat to be swathed by a gossamer veil, a light coat to be slipped on, a heavy coat to be slung over the arm, then down the bare worn stairs and out into the sunshine of spring playing at being summer.

No greetings at all were exchanged—just a very intimate smile, rugs drawn across, adjusted and tucked in, then out of the shadows of Gray's Inn *en route* for the green-gold-and-blue of Surrey in spring time.

“You drive well!” observed Elsa when they were cutting their way Westward.

“My chauffeur wouldn't agree with you—but I think what you think. I am very pleased with myself about it!” answered Edward, simply pouring joy into her heart and vitality into her soul by means of looking with vivid blue eyes into hers.

A chauffeur? He had a chauffeur then?

Green Grapes

Of course he would have a chauffeur—at least it seemed strange to have a chauffeur in London when every week-end he went to—well, of course, that's what Elsa didn't know!

She did not know where the man who was going to be her lover spent his week-ends.

But never mind about that now—that was all right. To-day was to-day and the sun was shining and nothing passionately to be desired was unobtainable.

Bacchus was not wanted now. There seemed no place for him in the sunshine. . . .

On they shot Westward—through London—away from London—out of London—out of Middlesex—and then the green hills and bulging trees and flowering hedges began.

Elsa's heart swelled as she saw them, for when the human soul is ready for love Nature in her pollen time of re-creating makes special appeal.

"I am glad Clare isn't with us!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"Who is Clare and why are you glad she in particular isn't with us?" enquired Edward, slackening pace.

"Clare—er—oh! she is just as a dear good woman I know who always has a knack of spoiling one's pleasure by uttering sensible remarks. For instance, if she were here now and I told her how I adored this stillness and greenness and silence she would say: '*Yes, it's wonderful how much beauty one can get out of the cockney spots near London, isn't it?*' And that would *kill* my feelings when I want to think that I am miles and miles away beyond the edge of nowhere!"

"So we are—so we are—we are in a country all of our own which can never be invaded so long as we want to be King and Queen of it. Is there a single soul in sight?"

"No—er—__"

"Can you see the remotest suggestion of a house, a chimney pot, a trail of smoke, a railway line?"

"No—er—__"

"Then we *are* miles and miles away beyond the edge of nowhere! We've left Land's End behind us, we've slipped past the coast of the farthest Orkney Isle—we've found some place which no one else can ever find and we are so happy in it that we are going to stay here for the rest of our

Green Grapes

lives ! Come——” (by this time he had driven the car off the road on to a grass plateau, and had come to a halt) get out and look at a view extending over miles and miles of our new country—the country over which we are King and Queen ! ”

Elsa alighted from the car and walked by his side across the grass plateau, which suddenly shelved upward into a short, sharp incline.

Then they reached the top and she looked at what she was told to look at.

Green—green—green—the vivid, gaudy, audacious green of new-born spring—swelling, rising, dipping hills—trees in lines, trees at a set distance, trees massed in such profusion as to form small mountains on their own account—and here and there the silver streak of some unimportant little river which very few people had ever heard of.

The supreme glory of Surrey which, if one can only forget Surrey’s propinquity to Middlesex—Middlesex holding the City of London!—is, in its own way, impossible to beat.

“ We can’t improve on our view, can we ? ” said Edward looking from one of Nature’s successful efforts to another. And this time he found the creamy softness of a human face even more desirable than a panorama of open country.

“ No, we can’t but—” she turned to him impulsively and merrily, “ —but do you know I’m afraid that views annoy me ! ”

“ I’m sorry ! Why ? ”

“ Because I’m not *in* them ! I am too much of an egoist to appreciate a view. I feel a trifle antagonistic towards anything in which I don’t take part, and for this very reason that theatres annoy me, views do the same. Besides, how *can* one enjoy looking at a large expanse of something one can’t get at ? ”

“ Well, how can one enjoy listening to a fine burst of orchestral music ? —one can’t get at that.”

“ No, but through the sense of hearing it gets right into one’s heart and creates all sorts of wonderful emotions. But a view can’t possibly make any personal appeal. No, views always annoy me, either on picture post cards or off

Green Grapes

them—I want something I can be *in* and *amongst* and take part in!"

Edward bowed his head with polite gravity, and considered for a moment.

"I think," he said after a pause, "that I may be able to manage something more satisfactory and more self-contained. Come this way."

And, without arguing, she went—went back down the grassy slope and plateau and across the road to the commencement of a small wood.

Edward held back two unfriendly branches which tried to bar the way, and Elsa passed from glow and glory into shade and silence.

For even though birds called and answered and quarrelled and sang love songs, there was that mysterious hush which casts its spell over every spot when trees grow densely, from the greatest forest to the smallest spinney.

The call of birds never destroys the silence of a wood.

"Is this better than a view?" asked Edward speaking softly as one instinctively does speak when Nature says "hush!"

"Yes, this is better—I am *in* this!" answered Elsa, drawing a deep breath that was not in the least a sigh.

Then she looked at the bluebells growing on every side, and from the bluebells to his eyes.

How absurd, how infinitely absurd for a woman to be comparing a man's eyes to bluebells! The comparison reversed would, of course, have been quite in order and in keeping with all traditions of the best novelettes, but as it was—

"What were you thinking about?"

At this very identical moment he questioned her and something compelled her to tell the truth.

"I was thinking that your eyes were exactly the colour of the lightest of those bluebells. Please don't think that I am paying you any sort of a compliment because it's not in the least clever of you to have eyes the colour of bluebells, and some people might think it a great improvement if they were the colour of—toffee or tortoiseshell. It's only just that you asked me and I answered!"

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He took her hands and held them and stood right in front of her—so fully in her line of vision that even the ghost of Bacchus and all other intruders were put outside the picture.

She could only see *him*. And things are always getting serious when a woman can only see—*him*!

“Is it still ‘not yet’?” he whispered.

“*Ti-witt, ti-witt!*” called a bird in one tree.

“*Ti-witt, ti-witt!*” came the answer from another tree.

This meant: “*I am waiting for you!*”—and the answer meant “*I am coming to you!*”

(All in Nature’s scheme of mating time!)

“No, it is no longer ‘not yet’!”

He nodded and, with a show of deliberation that was more exciting and stimulating to the senses than any rush of impetuous passion, unpinned her little hat and gauze veil and threw them on the ground. Then he took off his own cap and put it beside them.

“People were never meant to make love in hats,” he murmured.

And the next moment Elsa Johnson-Carr came into her Woman’s heritage of comprehension—comprehension of what life really means when the love of a loved man enters into it.

“*Hoo-oo-oo!*” crooned a bird on a branch.

“*Hoo-oo-oo-oo-hoo-oo!*” crooned another bird on the same branch.

This meant:

“*I am your mate and you are my mate, and our spring-time of joy has only just begun!*”

“Elsa, my dearest, isn’t it wonderful that we’ve found each other to love!” cried Edward holding her face in both his hands and looking at the lips which he had just kissed.

And even the audacity of that “each other” didn’t seem to matter.

It was supreme audacity and supreme conceit—but then it was so true!

And it’s no use resenting what’s true.

In the end the person who tries it always looks a found-out fool!

Green Grapes

CHAPTER XIX

TO DO WITH AN HOUR OF SOLACE.

A WONDERFUL day—a day that left warmth on the lips and cheeks and at the heart—and now it was over !

Over !

How tragic it is that joyousness should be over and done with so soon ! Of course, there is always the next time, but the next time may never be quite the same as this time !

Elsa tried not to lower her own barometer of happiness by chill winds of introspection, but directly Edward and the car had left the Passage and the Square her mind began casting about for something new to think about.

Of course, she could go on thinking about the kisses that had been kissed, the complete sympathy that had been established, the passionate ardour that blazed to a golden heat, but—but—well, when the brain is active and sufficiently young it can't feed itself for long on a diet of harking back—even ten minutes !

What was Edward thinking about as he motored back to his flat in Jermyn Street ? Was he thinking of all that had been to-day, or of all that would be to-morrow ?—or of neither one nor the other ?

To imagine that he might not be thinking of either one or the other was obviously absurd, yet, of course, men can detach their minds, particularly men no longer fired by flames of sentimental boyhood—men of experience—

Experience !

What a nasty word !

Elsa repeated it and remembered various things.

The manner in which Edward had unpinned and taken off her hat was—*experienced*. And he had gone from the grassy plateau to the entrance of the wood without any of the explorer's hesitation, evidently being sure of exactly where he was going—with the air of a person who had been there before—often before.

Green Grapes

And a man doesn't go to a silent, shady wood by himself—and not usually with another man !

When they had sat down among the bluebells, too, he seemed to know that she (Elsa) wanted something to lean up against, and at a moment of ardent emotion a man doesn't take into consideration those small feminine needs, at least not unless he is—*experienced* !

Good heavens ! it might be that Edward Arkenson was a sort of professional amorist, and that he knew exactly the right time and place for appealing to every variety of woman !

Flippant "flappers" he probably took to dances and gained their avowals after a particularly close-pressing "hesitation waltz" or riotous one-step. Desirable young women of the "half-world" he, of course, fed and wined at expensive restaurants—any place, any time where the potency of expenditure could make itself felt. Scholarly young women—well, it might even be that he took those to the Reading Room of the British Museum before securing the surrender of their lips to his own.

And sentimental, reflecting, emotional, would-be unconventional, daring young women (she, of course, was all that—poor fool !)—well, those he would naturally woo in some environment where Nature could appeal to the senses as she always does appeal to that particular class of femininity !

Probably he took all the young women of her (Elsa's) group to a dim and silent Surrey wood where birds called to their mates, and where an atmosphere of safe and passionate solitude prevailed—and probably he always took off their hats and veils (that is if they wore veils) before—

Heavens ! what was the matter with this devilish mind of hers ! Why couldn't it let her rest ? Why must she see with this cruel clearness when in all probability—no, *possibility*—there was nothing to see ?

Perhaps she wouldn't see so well if the light was out ?—for it might be that her mind kept pace with her eyes ?

So Elsa switched off the light. But she wasn't in the dark, for the night was fine and the declining moon sent a silvery haze to earth, while from a lamp just against the

Green Grapes

arch leading from the Passage to the Square came a definite illumination.

But this punctured gloom was anyhow more restful than the glare had been, and if the mind of a woman who loved could ever be at rest it might be at rest in such an atmosphere of dusky calm.

Elsa leaned her arms on the window sill and looked out—

“Experienced!”

What a hideous word !

Yet wasn't she herself experienced ? She had been married, she had left girlhood's ignorance behind, she—she—

No, no, she *wasn't* experienced—for the reason that her heart and soul had been without knowledge until now, and—and—

But who was that over there in the gloom near the book-case ? Was it a shape or just one of the shadows ?

It seemed to be taking form and semi-substance, and it was beckoning—now a face—gleaming, winking, leering—

“My boy Bacchus !”

Elsa called out as she would call to a friend who had appeared just when his presence was most needed—for now that Bacchus was just a friend and no longer an embryo lover, she could be merry and pleasant with him.

She just looked upon him as her boy—her boy Bacchus !!

“Yes, you are telling me to leave off thinking these ugly things, aren't you, Bacchus ? And you say that your way is the only way that will make me able to leave off—and your way is—is—oh ! Bacchus, it's on the shelf behind the side-board door, isn't it ? And I can find it in the dark as well as in the light, can't I ? Perhaps it will be sweeter in the dark ! I shan't be shy—even of myself ! Very well, my boy Bacchus, I'll do what you say—I'll do just what you say ! ”

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It was joyous ! The cool of a dark night and the warmth of a wonderful sensation !

A long draught—another—a pause for restful abandon-

Green Grapes

ment—short dallying sips like a lover toying mischievously with the lips of his beloved—then another draught—

Ah ! it had been a perfect day !—she and Edward had made it perfect together—Edward, who was all her own and had never been anyone else's—Edward, who had learnt kissing upon her lips—who had learnt to embrace a woman by holding *her* in his arms !

Everything was right with the world !—yes, her world was all right, and it was her Boy Bacchus who had made it so !

CHAPTER XX

TO DO WITH A CONVIVIAL MEETING

CLARE CARTER knew it.

It's true that Elsa told her less than a couple of hours after her return home, but she would have known it even if she hadn't been told. For Mrs. Johnson-Carr's companion-housekeeper—like many other people who appear harmlessly unobservant—generally realised all that was going on.

She didn't pry into a fact, or haul it over in her mind, or try and find unexpected side issues, but she did realise.

And this particular fact she had realised during dinner on the first night of Elsa's return—for with almost ostentatious audacity Elsa had ordered Barnstable to bring up champagne (and later on, liqueur brandy) which she had drunk copiously and resolutely—as though she had set herself out to shew what she could do now that once she had begun.

“Clare, my dear, I've achieved a result in record time ! I've trained myself to be a happy and contented drunkard in less time than it would take most people to leave off the habit of taking sugar in their tea !”

Directly after dinner was over Elsa had made this statement—one which Clare accepted interestedly and even excitedly, but which caused her pangs of unspeakable anguish.

Green Grapes

But she would have known it, for no woman ever drank *in the way* in which Elsa had trained herself to drink without being an either real or half-spurious drunkard.

Besides, even in this short time, a certain restlessness had crept into her manner while her eyes moved more quickly and were beginning to acquire the trick of glancing round nervously as though to ascertain if some unseen person was watching.

And Clare took the startling change in just the most sympathetically unimaginative way that any self-absorbed employer could demand while in her good sound sane clean heart sprang up a desperate resolve to try and undo what had been done.

And while Clare was grieving and wondering what it was her duty and right to do, Elsa gloried blatantly in her newly-acquired accomplishment of swallowing "fermented grape juice" with appreciation and enjoyment.

"You see, Barnstable, what I have learnt to please you," she said on the first night that champagne was ordered to be brought up for hers and Clare's *tête-à-tête* dinner.

And the old butler—who, being a man, didn't realise any more than he was told—beamed proudly, and ventured to say what a pleasure it would be to leave Apollinaris, lemonade and ginger ale down in the cellar.

But even though Elsa had brought her new vice from the seclusion of her secret retreat to the more or less public platform of her home life, she intended to go slow at Stoking Common.

She would take wine at the various dinner parties which social observances made it necessary for her to attend, but she wouldn't take too much of it.

When she wanted to take too much of it she would remain in the locked seclusion of her own bedroom with only Clare let into the secret of her indisposition. And when she wanted to take very much too much of it she would repair to the third-floor haven of Gray's Inn.

But she would only want to take very much too much of it when assailed by grey and black-tinged suspicions and ugly creations of a brain tortured by too clear insight into people and things.

Green Grapes

Elsa Johnson-Carr was curiously deliberate in adjusting the management of her new vice.

Positively she seemed to stage-manage it and take an eerie pleasure in doing the best with it that could be done.

So far—and therein lay hope of salvation and redemption—it was not spontaneous.

* * * * *

One after-lunch time when the telephone had got through an unusual amount of ringing, it rang again.

Elsa—who happened to be passing through the hall at the time—answered direct and found the caller to be Olga Heamick.

“Come and dine with me this evening and go on afterwards to what they call ‘A Revel’ at the Comtesse de Pradie’s studio,” she said in her usual tones of unconciliatory insistence.

“I don’t think I—”

“Oh! do get out of that uncomfortable habit of arguing, my dear. Whenever I ring up it’s always the same—some objection to something I propose! Now don’t discuss it, but be here at eight, and we’ll go and see life at the Revel! Ta-ta! till then!”

Tang—g—g! The receiver was replaced, and Elsa was faced by the alternatives of ignoring Olga Heamick and staying at home as she had intended to do, or of giving way to the demands of a selfishly dominant will.

She chose the latter. She would dine with Lady Heamick and she would go on afterwards to the Revel.

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Directly Elsa arrived at the Hotel Radium she could see that Olga Heamick was ill.

Her breath was short, and, beneath all the adjuncts which a French maid applied with consummate skill, the face showed lines and furrows and bulgings which had not been there before.

“We needn’t go till ten, so there’s no hurry to begin dinner?” This was her greeting and one which evidenced the drunkard’s perpetual desire to “put off.” Always

Green Grapes

behind time, never ready to do the thing at the moment she had arranged to do it, never prepared to carry out any definite programme which she herself had drawn up!

Elsa sat down and cocktails were brought. She took one.

"How did you like the medicine I gave you when you left last time?" enquired Olga suddenly, and with a light touch of the jolly laughter which had helped to make her likeable, and which even now brought a certain amount of youth back to her dragged and puffy face.

"I didn't like it at the time, but I think it helped to teach me—*this!*!" And with the last word Elsa held up the glass she was raising to her lips.

Olga comprehended immediately, but took it with curious matter-of-factness. She seemed to have lost the capacity for feeling actual surprise about anything.

"Then I've done good work if I've taught you how to enjoy yourself," was all she said—but from that moment Elsa felt that a new intimacy was established between them. It was as though some barrier had been knocked down, making it possible for one human soul to understand another human soul, and making it impossible for one human being to take the uncomfortable position of feeling more virtuous than another human being.

Champagne was served with dinner, and as course followed course, Olga's air of irresponsibility increased, while Elsa drank less than she remembered having drunk since joining the ranks of those who follow faithfully in the train of The Boy Bacchus.

The reason for this comparative abstinence wasn't easy to find, but it may have been that Elsa more or less refrained from drinking so that she could gain a clearer impression of a drunkard.

For suddenly she was seized by a morbid desire to see herself as the future might see her when the Wine God became a friend of longer standing.

So she sipped, and Olga swallowed, with the result that by the time they were ready to start for the Revel she was quite content to listen while her companion's thick-voiced volubility increased.

Green Grapes

" You know I don't know anything about this Comtesse de Pradie 'cept that they say she's jolly and all that sort of thing ! " she said, when they were seated in the car, en route for the Studio where the revel was to be held. " They say she's got a husband somewhere ; but I don't trouble about that—why should one trouble when a person's jolly ? Tell me, why should a person trouble ? You wouldn't trouble, would you ? . . . I say ' live and let live,' and don't ask questions—don't you ? It wouldn't do for it to get out in the papers that I went there, but one can't be always thinking about the damned papers, can one ? I say, ' have a good time,' and if Comtesse de Pradie gives one a good time, go and get it, that's all. . . . My husband believes in having a good time and gets it, too, doesn't he ? I heard yesterday that he had got near the Equator—I wonder if he and the lady found it hot enough ! Ha ! ha ! But it's all right—just have a good time, that's what I say, don't you ? Elsa, we're real old friends, aren't we, and we're never going to be anything else. I always loved you when we were children, didn't I, and if we didn't see each other for a time it was only because I couldn't find you. You know that was it, don't you, my dear ? "

With excusable disregard of the truth Elsa said that she did, after which the monologue continued on the same lines until the car set them down at their destination.

They both got out, and after lecturing the chauffeur for doing something he was never likely to do, Lady Heamick put her hand through Elsa's arm and forcibly dragged her through an eccentric-looking entrance, inside which a semi-nude negro servant held an orange-shaded lamp.

Elsa did not in the least require dragging, but that did not protect her from being treated like a resolute resister.

They went into a large studio of the usual type affected by amateur painters who can't paint and sculptors who can't sculpt, and Elsa was introduced airily to the giver of the Revel—a little dark woman, with a high-pitched voice and a brilliant smile, and who didn't appear able to do much except smile.

Green Grapes

"Now, Comtesse de Pradie, we've come to have a good time and you're going to give us a good time, aren't you?" said Lady Heamick. Then without waiting for any reply she seized a delicate fair-haired youth who happened to be standing near, and made him dance with her to the refrain of a song which someone was singing to the piano at the further end of the room.

The singer paid no attention to the unappreciative interruption, and in a few moments other couples had joined in and the "revel" was revelling merrily.

Elsa crept behind a pillar and watched them, for to-night it was her mood to watch.

As a rule the rôle of spectator was abhorrent to her. Just as it irritated her to look at a view and not be in it, so it irritated her to watch the doings of her fellow-creatures and not to take part in them.

But to-night it was different, and the reason may have been that there had entered into her own life a new element which was sufficient to absorb all the egoistic interests of her brain. For, as a rule, the person who needs to play a part in every drama going on around is the person whose own existence holds no vital interest.

It is a case of seeking, seeking, always seeking, and that restlessness never goes until what has been sought is found.

It is true that never before had Elsa been farther from finding a safe and secure happiness, but she *had* found an interest or, perhaps two—a man and a god!—and these made it possible for her to play the rôle of spectator without revolt.

To-night she was out to watch, and to absorb what she watched.

Green Grapes

CHAPTER XXI

TO DO WITH AN ORGY

TEN minutes after reaching her post of semi-concealment Elsa realised that practically every person taking part in the Comtesse de Pradie's revel was either partially or entirely drunk.

The "flappers" and younger women were "cheeky" with it, the maturer ones were amorous or argumentative, the boys were quarrelsome and the older men were fatuously senile before their time.

"Pop, pop, pop, that's what keeps me on the hop!"

Elsa heard this mellifluous couplet leave the lips of a fluffy young thing who couldn't have been more than eighteen and whose ears were alert to catch the merry sound of champagne music coming from a room which opened out of the studio and served as a refreshment lounge.

Her partner—who was hugging her closely but uninterestedly, while automatically dancing the fox-trot—guffawed appreciatively, left off hugging and fox-trotting, and hurried her into the room whence came the music of the corks.

And it was the way with them all—they might sing for five minutes or dance for six, or talk for three, but after doing this certain amount of duty to their hostess they were bound to drift back to the department presided over by Elsa's Boy Bacchus.

It was as though they couldn't keep away, as though some potent magnet was drawing and dragging and making them open their mouths so that all the golden bubbling fluid should be poured down before other mouths were able to secure a larger share.

Elsa crept round from the pillar and without being noticed reached the door of the refreshment lounge, and watched.

In a way it reminded her of a school treat—of children

Green Grapes

fighting for buns and cake, and afraid of being out of the way when a fresh relay of oranges was being handed round.

It was a positive fact that these panting eager soakers were afraid of being absent when the enormous butler (or waiter?) denuded yet another bottle of its gold hat and wire entrenchments.

They pressed up close and those who were so far affected as entirely to forget convention and nice middle-class manners pushed each other aside and held out their glasses with a strong resoluteness worthy of hungry strugglers who might have been waiting for over an hour at the doors of an East End soup kitchen.

But the others whose heads were stronger and methods more subtle waited till the first rush was over and then idly dropped into chairs drawn up close to where the butler (or waiter?) was dispensing nourishment, and waited for him to do his best.

And this he usually did, because these people who sat tight saved him from some of the pushing and jostling of those who played the game of soup kitchens and school treats.

Another method was the unselfish and helpful task of looking after other people. This was adopted principally for the youths and flappers who were continually offering to get drinks for other people—which made a splendid opportunity for getting unlimited drinks for themselves.

“Isn’t it horrible?”

Suddenly Elsa heard this whispered remark and knew it was being addressed to her, and, looking round, she saw that a small feminine person wearing glasses and an unimaginative black frock had crept up to her side and was watching the Boy Bacchus department with a critical and introspective air of impersonal interest.

“I—I suppose it is,” answered Elsa a little weakly—then she laughed. Considering various circumstances it was impossible not to laugh at her own agreement with the small lady’s verdict.

“Yes, I can see that you think so because you are not joining the bibulous throng and I am quite justified in giving myself the pleasure of saying what I think because,

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Being a journalist sent to report the function at the hostess's request, *and* a teetotaler, I may say catty things to a fellow-abstainer."

Fellow-abstainer, when—when—oh! God, *was* this drink a horrible thing?—after all, *was* it the horrible thing which Elsa had always thought until "Big Bertie" taught her **to** regard it as a beautiful thing?

No, it couldn't be horrible when it smoothed off the edge from cruel poignant thoughts, yet—

"Drunkards have always been subjects of particular interest to me——" (again the small lady was speaking)—"and, as is the case with so many people who don't drink, I seem to have come across a great quantity of them. I have not had many people in love with me, but once there was one, and he was a drunkard—one of those amiable soakers, who drink everything everybody asks them to drink, and when nobody else asks them, begin on their own account. And it is his breath that I shall never forget! He would put his face close to mine, and whisper tender somethings and—oh! the unimaginable horror of that breath! It was like a mixture of odours from rotting cabbage, decaying fungi, decomposing rats and sour trifle made with rum. I know that there are soakers who can soak without perfuming the surrounding atmosphere; but the others—oh! they're unforgettable, aren't they?"

Elsa agreed they were, and glanced towards where Lady Heamick was whispering funny jokes—really funny and not foul—into the ear of the fair pale youth whom she had seized and forced to dance.

Probably by this time the pale youth shared the small lady's opinion on the fragrant subject of drunkards' breaths!

"There is nothing like drink for being varied and endless in its efforts, is there?" went on the small lady, whom (Elsa decided) enjoyed talking like the articles which she hoped that papers and magazines might commission her to write. "The jolly drunkard is so very jolly when drunk, isn't he or she, and so very un-jolly when sober? I remember meeting one of these for the first time in the evening, and finding him witty and delightful. He was drunk then.

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I came across him the next day and found him surly and dull. He was sober then, and I felt a sort of wild longing to drag him into a public house and keep him there until he was what he had been the night before ! Look at that poor soul now !—so pitiful, isn't it ? ”

Elsa looked at the individual indicated, and saw a very short, enormously stout woman dressed in emerald satin and smothered in Parisian diamonds. She was sitting next to a smart, super-well-groomed young man (obviously the grooming procured by means of other people's money), who was permitting her to press her bulging elbow in the hollow of his arm and to rest one puffy be-ringed hand on his knee while, in pretending to whisper in his ear, she rubbed her enormous painted cheek against his own.

This was the amorous side of drink presented in one of its most revolting guises.

“ The feminine drunkards who break into drama are also very diverting, aren't they ? ” continued the small lady. “ These declaim a great deal and assume many Britannia-like attitudes while giving vent to no end of splendidly patriotic sentiments. I should think that one there—wearing brown satin, with amber beads—might be dramatic. I can't quite make out if she is reciting now—or is she only denouncing the butler who has allowed a wait of three minutes between filling her glass ? ”

This last surmise interested Elsa, so she moved a little nearer and heard the brown-and-amber lady's enunciation of the following fine sentiments :

“ For me loyalty is the key of life ! To the end I am loyal—loyal to country, King, Friend and Lover ! Not one of these would I fail in hour of need ! Not one should hold out a hand that I would not take ! In fair weather or foul weather, in life or death, in riches or poverty, Loyalty is the word which binds together the hearts of Englishmen and women all the world over ! ”

The sentiments were really very fine, and, considering how vehemently they were expressed, it seemed surprising that nobody took any notice of them. But nobody did, and when Elsa moved back again a second, an even more fervent outbreak of noble maxims was about to begin.

Green Grapes

And all this was the work of Boy Bacchus !

Elsa frowned and felt grieved, as we do feel when someone in whom we believe does the wrong thing.

Boy Bacchus was a good boy when he helped Olga Heamick to take a philosophical and even merry view of her own heart tragedy, also when he drew across her (Elsa's) eyes a misty gauze veil which kept her from seeing too clearly all the things in life which are sordid and unsatisfactory and unidealistic.

But to-night—oh ! his mood to-night was a wickedly devilish and prankish one !

He seemed to have stuffed wool into all the women's mouths so that when they spoke it was difficult to distinguish words—and to have poked skinny brown fingers into their eyes, so that a condition of watery luminousness prevailed—and to have so dulled and atrophied their senses that all their natural dignity and decency was laid aside.

It was cruel of him to make that stout grandmother loll back with skirt drawn aside so that two overlapping calves shrouded in yellow silk stockings were exposed to view ! It was criminal of him to force a white, girlish—almost babyish—shoulder to wriggle aside a strap of silver tissue and tiny rosebuds so that a straight band-like bodice should drop lower and lower and dangerously lower still ! It was demoniacal of him to force a grey-bearded and distinguished man of science to balance on his knee a peroxide-haired poetess who was initiating him into the helpful and serviceable art of blowing smoke kisses from his mouth into hers ! It was relentless of him to take that alert, comparatively clean-minded boy and compel him to sit in limp abandonment, telling pornographic stories to a group of other boys whose minds were no more naturally salacious than his own !

Cruel, cruel tricks all of them for a Wine God to play upon defenceless mortals who had never done him any harm ! . . .

“ Excuse me, but I'm *not* your cousin in America ! ” This statement was suddenly shouted by a young man with a perky scarlet face who was addressing another young man with rumpled hair and a splendidly haughty mien.

Green Grapes

"I am sorry, but I never said you were my cousin in America!"

"You said I was *like* your cousin in America, because I heard you—and you laughed when you said it!"

"Well, if I did, I fail to see why being like my cousin in America should annoy you!"

"To begin with, it was the way you said—that in itself was an insult—"

"What? To you, or to my cousin in America?"

"Well, that of course is a *direct* insult and I must demand an apology!"

"And I shall demand something more than an apology. I shall demand to have you turned out of this studio, and if the demand is not complied with things will be somewhat uncomfortable for your features. Such damnable impertinence must be squashed and why the — a — — — like you should have the — — — —

Elsa didn't wait to hear any more because, though to a certain extent comic, the situation was foul, and the language—prompted by no one but Boy Bacchus!—was of the variety which falls like lumps of jagged iron on the ears of women unaccustomed to it.

Words! A mere matter of consonants, and vowels arranged in certain sequence, yet capable of causing sensations curiously akin to physical anguish! . . .

When Elsa had returned to the shelter of her pillar the hostess approached and looked up at her like a little perky canary who has been given a too liberal allowance of hemp and maw seed.

"Now, Mrs.—er—er Bronson-Bray I hope you are having a good time! Are you being looked after all right?"

"Thank you, I am having a most *interesting* time," replied Elsa with almost too cordial emphasis. For excess of cordiality is always worth while when it is likely to have the effect of getting an unwanted person out of the way.

"I am so glad and we must—oh! Count, is that you! How late you are, but better never late—er—"

And off she whisked to greet a small, spiky, grinning,

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glittering, gesticulating person who sported several bits of ribbon which might or might not bear investigation.

Once more Elsa was alone among many, and though the magnetism of her personality—which always drew the opposite sex of every age and most types—caused various masculine revellers to approach from time to time, she kept her attractions so forcibly in check that she was almost immediately allowed to return to her condition of watchful isolation.

For when a charming woman wants to leave off being charming she can, by means of certain ponderous and dreary methods, keep away anything male, from spotty schoolboys to fatuous bearded veterans. In two minutes she can make herself into a heavy-faced conscientious bore—and when the candle isn't alight moths cease to flutter round!

And there Elsa remained, watching and learning lessons until at last she went over to Lady Heamick and suggested taking their departure.

Olga—who was sitting on a low settee holding in her hand an empty glass—looked up and smiled weakly.

“What-jer-mean?” she murmured feebly.

And then Elsa realised that a very horrible moment must come and that she was called upon for strong determined action.

“Come now,” she said.

“My dear, dond-jer-try——”

“Come at once, Olga.”

“I-doan-wan-der-come-till——”

But somehow Elsa managed it—managed, by sheer force of will, to quiet the stream of almost unintelligible protest, to get her out of the room through the entrance and into the waiting car.

Then in silence they sat side by side and Elsa remembered the small lady's hideous description of a drunkard's breath:

“Rotting cabbage, decaying fungi, decomposing rats and sour trifles made with rum!”

Yes, it was like that now—the car seemed full of it, and it was necessary to let down both windows so that a stream of rushing air should blow away the hideous odours.

Green Grapes

"Come in with me!" Lady Heamick commanded when the Hotel Radium was reached.

"No, Olga, it is too late."

"Too late be damned!" Suddenly she seemed to become dangerously alert and alive, and Elsa saw that if she did not comply there would be a scene on the pavement.

"But I've got to get home yet, Olga."

"For God's sake don't argue! I told you that Brownlow would take you on. Get out and come in and have a drink, then you shall go—shan't be long, Brownlow—come on—come on!"

Elsa followed her helplessly—past the sleepy night porter and up the lift to the private suite on the first floor.

"Now, my dear, make yourself jolly, make yourself jolly. Brandy—I know where that is, we'll get it without calling Bateman—here it is—that's the only thing after the other stuff! The other stuff's all right, but this gets there quicker—here's my glass—let me fill it and then help yourself. My goodness! it's fine to get to this—nothing like it—fine!"

Elsa not being required to make any response, continued the rôle of spectator which she had played throughout the evening. As a rule it bored her to watch, but to-night she didn't wish to do anything else. For the time being she just wanted to eliminate herself.

And she watched Olga Heamick swallow tumbler after tumbler of brandy, until gradually the woman's whole aspect seemed to be undergoing a complete change.

Her eyes sank in and her nose swelled out until there seemed nothing but bulging cheeks and bulging lips to form the entire face.

Was she turning into a pig?—a goblin?—a futurist atrocity?

She was turning into something horrible—*horrible*—

"It's so good, Els—Els—Elsa—it's so good, but oh! God! when I can't take any more!—but I *must* take more somehow—because it's Life, it's Life! And Life can get through anyway—it can make its way through like a shower! Yes, a shower of Life!—look!—a sh—sh—shower of Life!"

Green Grapes

And shouting the last word after mumbling the preceding ones, the unhappy woman seized the bottle, lifted it above her head and proceeded to pour out the brandy, so that slowly it trickled through and soaked her hair running down her neck, down beneath the *decolletée* bodice and between her breasts.

"It's gorgeous—gorgeous—I'm not wasting any—it's soaking through—but it's not enough—I want to swim in it—to sit in it—to—to—Bateman! Bateman! come here—fill the bath with brandy—the bath—the bath—"

But Elsa didn't wait to hear if Bateman rebelled or obeyed—she just opened the door and rushed away as though pursued by a whole squadron of evil spirits.

If this was the brutal blighting work of Boy Bacchus she must leave him and forget him and never again call him to her aid!

That woman pouring brandy over her hair!—heaven! what an unforgettable sight!!

And all the fault of Boy Bacchus—devilish, grinning Boy Bacchus!

No wonder he grinned!

CHAPTER XXII

TO DO WITH A FINANCIAL SCHEME

THE question was, should she ever return to the other and newly organised half of her life? Should she cut it out, "cut it out," and forget that it had ever been?

Nothing would be simpler. The rent was paid up in advance, and if the keys were sent back to Ralph Oldham that would be the end of the interlude.

And what had been the interlude? What had it done? What was it for? What was it worth? What would be the result of it?

And could it be wiped out as though it had never been, or would the call of two voices—the voice of a blue-eyed lover and the voice of a grinning, winking friend—be too insistent to be disregarded?

Green Grapes

Yes, Elsa wondered if she could "cut it out" and go back to where she had been before Edward Arkenson taught her how to live, and Boy Bacchus taught her how to see things through rosy mist of unthinking contentment—she wondered if she could!

For just as Boy Bacchus had horrified and disgusted her so might Edward Arkenson! Love might not prove any more satisfactory than Drink!—drink, which had the power of changing a collection of merry-making, sane human beings into a band of snivelling, drivelling, quarrelling, leering, slobbering, semi-indecent, illogical, incapables, and of turning a handsome, witty, amusing woman into a maniac, with the face of a debauched pig!

Yet, when either Love or Drink have made their appearance and given evidence of how they can change grey into gold and *penseroso* into *allegro*, it is difficult to issue an edict of banishment!

* * * * *

On the day following "The Revel" Elsa stayed at home trying to think the best of everything and everybody, and only succeeding in seeing the very worst.

On the day following that she lunched at one place and dined at another, realising fully all the time how if she had been ill-dressed, unable to give desirable return hospitality and without useful acquaintances, her part in these little social scenes would have been entirely different. Either (quite fairly, of course) she wouldn't have been there at all, or if she had been there she would have been put at the draughtiest and dullest end of the lunch table, and taken in to dinner by the deafest, poorest and stupidest of the make-weight men!

As it was—as her frocks came from Bond Street, as she could afford to give out-of-season delicacies, and the best wines Carmena and Hoyce cellars could produce, as her social circle was one well worth exploiting—she was flattered, feted, made a fuss of, and generally given the best of good times.

But there was no good time really possible when she realised so fully the why and wherefore of it all.

Green Grapes

(And that's where Boy Bacchus came in so usefully—in preventing her from seeing the why and wherefore of it all !)

Then, on the day following the next day a man—quite a young man and named Geff Gaze—took her out to dinner and made love to her.

Previously she had refused to accept either his food or his love-making—knowing why both were placed at her disposal—but on this occasion she changed her policy, changed it deliberately and for the sake of experiment.

For she wanted to see if it was that her mind had an awkward habit of delving and probing and digging until it found the truth, or if it might be that this same disturbing mind took wrong views of everything.

Hitherto she had never really given anything a chance : she would now give this personable young man a chance of proving that he wasn't all which her warped ungenerous mind took him to be.

And he began well—called for her in a taxi and took her to an exclusive restaurant, then to a box at the most banal therefore the most popular revue in town (ices and chocolates all the time) then—after she had refused supper at another exclusive restaurant—brought her home in the same taxi.

And throughout the evening his conduct had been admirable—tender, confidential, adoring, talking about *her* instead of about himself—and without giving a single hint or throwing out the faintest suggestion that he was remotely interested in what she possessed or might possess, until at last Elsa began to wonder if her unpleasant mind had always been busy misjudging this affluent and disinterested Geff Gaze.

Perhaps he was really well-off—better than herself—in which case—er—well, in which case he would at least merit consideration !

Then when they reached home the real love-making began and—still for the sake of experiment—Elsa permitted it to begin.

If this would help her to forget a new love—about whom she didn't know anything at all and who, therefore, might only be a make-believe love—she would permit it to go on.

Green Grapes

"This is what I've been dreading all the evening—the end of it!" Geff murmured this a little heavily, and when Elsa looked up into his eyes she found they were just one quarter closed. Persumably the intensity of his passion was already overwhelming him. (He had a charming profile.)

"It's been a very *nice* evening," she answered trying to attune her voice to his.

"You mean that, Elsa?" Now he was gripping her bare arm.

"Of course!" Again she looked up—

"Darling! you love me! I've made you love me! I knew I *would* do it in the end—I knew a woman like you couldn't go on without love for ever! Elsa—dearest!"

And, to her own everlasting regret, she didn't put a stop to the kiss—for that, too, must play its part in this interlude given over to experiment.

The kiss which Edward Arkenson had laid upon her lips had seemed so strong, so full of some undescribable assurance of real devotion as well as passion that it was almost impossible to imagine the possibility of its being inspired by anything except genuine and uncontested love.

Yet it might not be as it seemed, and if another kiss were to appear equally sincere and fond something might be proved—or not proved!

Elsa smiled provocatively and said nothing, whereat a handsome young man bent a well-groomed head and laid a charmingly-shaped mouth upon her own. . . .

Pressure, passion, fervour—yes, all of these, but surely something was lacking? A kiss that might stir the passions, but could never reach the heart.

Or was this just fancy, as Elsa was beginning to wonder if half her turbulent upsetting thoughts might be fancy?

"What does this mean?" she asked suddenly, gently pressing him away.

"It means—oh! Elsa, you know now what it means!—it means that we must be lovers! You, with all your lovely ripe womanhood, must need love—and I can give you all you need!"

Need love! That was the second time he had used that expression—as though she wanted some marketable article

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which he was able to supply. The term savoured too much of commercialism to quite fit in with ardour and romance—at least, perhaps this idea was only another distortion of a dissatisfied mind !

“ You say ‘ lover ’ Geff—what do you imply by that ? ”

“ That rests with you, darling. I am all or anything you wish me to be.”

“ Do you mean that you want to marry me ? ”

“ Of course I mean that if you will take me and trust me to make good. Or if you are afraid of a lifelong bargain I could live anywhere you chose to—to—to select and then we could have heavenly secret meetings and I should always be ready to go where you wished, when you wished and—and oh ! dearest, how gloriously happy I can make you ! ”

A light was dawning—she nearly understood.

“ Are you rich or poor ? ” Quite lightly and cheerily she put the question—as though there had drifted into her head a thistledown thought which didn’t in the least matter.

“ I haven’t a bean, darling, not a bean—as, of course, you know or guess.”

“ Then how could we marry, or how about the place where you would live and we could have the heavenly secret meetings ? ”

He looked at her swiftly and narrowly; a sudden expression of cunning had flashed across his handsome face.

“ Well, darling, I would give you love in return—”

“ —in return for board and lodging, I suppose ? Either we marry and I keep you that way, or we have heavenly secret meetings in some smart bachelor flat, of which I pay the rent, among other things ? That’s it, isn’t it ? I expect it’s fair ; I’ve no doubt that the overplus of women in England makes it quite fair. But—er—to me—well, that must be for future consideration. In the meantime, how much have you spent on taxis this evening ? ”

“ My dearest—”

“ Answer me—*please !* ” The last word was quite sweetly and smilingly spoken, so he thought merely that she was going to be sensible and business-like from the beginning.

Green Grapes

"From town to here—how much?"

"Five and eightpence, I think."

"Yes, and about fourpence extra in waits—six shillings. And six shillings back—and say two from the restaurant to the theatre—and tips—we'll say seventeen shillings for taxis. Now the dinner bill—I think I caught sight of that—two pounds twelve, wasn't it?—and four shillings tip, making £2 16s. Then the box at the theatre, two guineas—and chocolates and ices, say ten shillings. That makes in all £6 5s.—(My arithmetic's good, isn't it?)—and add on another fifteen shillings for your time—I don't think it's worth more, do you?) and that is £7. Now I believe I've got five pounds in notes on me—and two in that little corner drawer of the bureau. Yes, that's right! Here it is—seven pounds, which clears up the whole business and doesn't make me feel that I've taken anything under false pretences. Now I'll say good night, and in applying for another situation I shall be very pleased to give you a reference. I am not open to engage you myself, but I am quite ready to testify to your admirable methods of ordering meals, handing one in and out of taxis, throwing ardent glances, bending over the back of chairs and pressing hands. The kiss I don't think was quite convincing, but there's no need to say anything about that to a prospective employer. Good night—good luck!"

And he went—and he took the money with him.

And when he had gone Elsa straightway forgot all about the horrible results which Boy Bacchus could achieve when his mood was one of infamous devilry, and went into the dining-room.

Brandy! There was brandy in the tantalus, as well as whisky—and whisky was absolutely unpalatable and unalluring. Wine? No, there didn't appear to be any wine ready opened—so brandy was the only thing.

Not much of it, but just enough to make things appear a shade less sordid and hideous and to restore some of the *amour propre* which she had lost by the recent financial-amorous encounter.

And just enough to remind her that Edward Arkenson's kiss was entirely different from that of the man who didn't

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love her—and that a very short time in train or taxi could get her back to Gray's Inn—and that when she got back to Gray's Inn she—she—well, anyhow, she would find possibilities not to be found at Burlford Grange!

Elsa took the stopper out of the brandy decanter, and when an hour later she went to bed the past appeared like pleasant dream, which didn't matter while the future was gaily coloured like June roses.

And the Boy Bacchus winked.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO DO WITH A BUNCH OF GRAPES

THE next day Elsa went back to Gray's Inn—went back because she wanted her lover and her friend.

It's true that Boy Bacchus could be with her at Burlford Grange just as well as at West Passage, but somehow she felt more at home with him when right away from the watchful eyes of Clare Carter.

And Edward Arkenson, of course, was only on in the scenes of her lonely life in London. And she wanted Edward Arkenson because, judging by comparison, she felt that he loved her. For the future, whatever tormenting suspicions might come into her mind, there should never be the thought that her new love didn't love her.

And he wanted *her*. He didn't know that she had any possessions, or that she was in any way either socially or financially desirable, therefore when he took her in his arms and kissed her, it was because she—the woman—made an appeal to his heart and his desires.

So she went back to the new life she had made for herself, and on reaching West Passage and having mounted half the stairs leading to the third floor of No. 8, she met Edward Arkenson coming down.

He didn't only smile—he actually laughed, and when he

Green Grapes

laughed Elsa felt like a schoolgirl who adored toffee and loathed wine.

“I’ve been every day to see when you were coming back to me.” These were the only words of greeting he uttered before turning round and re-ascending the stairs he had just descended.

Then he waited while Elsa came up and found her latch key and turned it in the lock—then he followed her into the flat and shut the door.

Then he sat down on an overturned mineral water box lying in the hall, and took her in his arms and wiped away the memory of the kiss which had been inspired by considerations more financial than fond.

“I’m so glad to have you back,” he whispered right into her ear. There was no need to whisper, but the very lowering of voices made them feel as though they were playing a great game of hiding something from the world.

Then he sat and rocked her in his arms as though she were younger than she ever remembered having been in all her life.

And time passed joyfully and gladly as time can only pass for people who at the moment have all they desire in life and do not permit themselves to be tortured by thoughts concerning the future.

Strange, too, that there should be such fulness and completeness when they were together seeing there were no mutual interests, mutual acquaintances or mutual tastes to create the perfect sympathy which existed !

When that first rapturous embrace was over they drifted into the sitting-room where on the desk in the window lay a letter addressed in Annock Bee’s quaint straggling handwriting.

Elsa looked at it, saw Edward look at it, and then said nothing. She wondered if he would say something, but he didn’t. It was almost as though he didn’t want her to see that he had seen—as on occasions men will do when they don’t want to pay a woman the compliment of desiring to know more about her and her doings than they have any right to know !

Oh ! these men, what a lot of childish pride they’ve got

Green Grapes

and what babies they are ! How they'll pretend anything sooner than let themselves go at what they consider the wrong moment !

“ Tell me some of your views on things in general ! ” cried Elsa impulsively. “ Remember, I don't really know you in the least, or what you feel or think or anything, and two people never feel fully in sympathy until they have found each other's minds. Tell me what your mind thinks about various things.”

“ What things ? ”

“ Choose three subjects yourself.”

“ Very well, I choose Women, Will-power and——”

“ —oh ! say ‘ Wine ’ ! I know it makes a third W, but it would be so boring and conventional ! ”

“ No, I wasn't going to say ‘ wine ’—Wisdom was my third subject. I'll tell you what I think about Women, Will-power and Wisdom.”

“ That should be interesting—begin with Women ! ”

“ Women ? Well, Women—so far as they affect the lives of men—are either all-important or less than nothing at all. There is no medium course, and people who think there is make a tremendous mistake. For the woman we love is the pivot and mainspring of our life, while all the others—dear good souls who teach us and tend us and nurse us and cook for us and sing for us and act for us—are less than nothing at all. People think this isn't the case, but they make a mistake, for among the women whom we talk to and dance with and dine with there isn't one for whom we'd even sigh if we didn't see her again. But then SHE comes right into the middle of things and immediately life assumes an aspect of real importance. If most women only knew how men meant nothing and thought nothing and felt nothing when they appear quite on the verge of being devoted there wouldn't be so much competition for our very scarce, and therefore very valuable, selves. Women wouldn't like us, or want us, or feel the remotest interest in us if they only knew how the ‘ many ’ appear to be without the faintest importance or significance directly ‘ the one ’ lets herself come into the picture—that pretty make-believe picture painted by the hand of Imagination

Green Grapes

and framed in a frame of gossamer fairies' wings ! That is what I think about Women ! "

" You think rather nicely ! And what about Will-power ? "

" I think that Will-power is the most important factor in human existence—the will-power of being able completely to subjugate ourselves. The man or woman whose will is so strong that it has complete control of his or her body and actions has found the solution to every difficulty in life. But such a person doesn't exist—when he does we shall know that the Deity has come down to earth—for it is this supremacy of will-power that makes the Deity Himself."

" Christian Science and clairvoyance are really branches of will-power, aren't they ? "

" They may be, probably they are, but I have never wanted to know anything about either of them. I'm only interested in my own will-power over myself, which, so far, is in a very satisfactory condition ! "

" What, can't you make yourself do what you want yourself to do ? "

" Very often I can't, and still more often I can't keep myself from doing what I don't want myself to do ! But I'm getting better, I'm improving. Directly I saw you I adored you and directly I adored you I made myself set out to get to know you (conventionally, as you demanded) even though certain impulses and arguments seemed to point out that it was better to leave you alone. But my will told me not to leave you alone, so I obeyed my will, and here we are joyously and happily revelling in being lovers ! My will-power has served me usefully in this case, hasn't it, darling ? "

And with the last word he leant across and kissed her as though some sort of arrangement had been established which gave him the right to kiss her whenever and wherever he pleased.

Lovers !

What did the word actually mean in their case ?

Elsa couldn't help asking herself the question, for she felt that soon there would be need for adjustment of the situation.

Green Grapes

"Lovers! No two people can go on calling themselves "lovers" without specifying what sort of lovers they mean. . . .

"And Wisdom? What do you think about Wisdom?"

"I think that true wisdom is only achieved by the individual who makes a steady search after happiness, and who hangs on to it when he has got it. But it often—nearly always, in fact—happens that he has to train himself to see what *is* happiness. Happiness has a knack of hiding itself behind all sorts of cloaks. But we must tear those cloaks away, spot the real thing, and never allow feelings of prudence or caution to interfere with reaching the ultimate goal. Wisdom and Will-power are apt to get mixed up with one another, but Wisdom pure and simple I define as a search after happiness and the seizing of happiness when once it is found. Just think what quantities of people do fail to seize happiness when it comes their way, and what fools they are for doing it—and how intensely wise are those who don't do it! Think of that, my darling—think!"

"I'll think!" answered Elsa—and once again the interlude of semi-philosophic seriousness became a lover's hour.

It was a golden hour.

* * * * *

Directly Edward had gone—after arranging that they should dine together the following evening—Elsa opened and read Annock Bee's letter.

It was not long, and, to be strictly accurate, not particularly inspiring, but it just fitted in with Elsa's mood of the moment—and she sat down and answered without delay.

"Dear Poet Philosopher,

"I am so glad to get your letter and truly sorry that you don't get as strong and well as you ought to get. Remember my prescription—a visit to London! Do try it soon.

"You are kind and patient enough to ask me to go on telling you all that I want to tell about myself.

"Well, I want to tell everything because though you are so far away you are so sweetly and helpfully sympathetic.

Green Grapes

"I don't know where to begin except to say that I believe I'm quite losing hold of myself in every way.

"I am so terribly uncertain of everything—except that I love a man whose name begins with E. I almost forget what I told you last time.

"Well, I have been away from here again and while away I saw certain sights which made me decide entirely to give up the comforting habit which I have recently contracted.

"You know what I mean, don't you? I mean DRINK!

(Doesn't it look a horrible word when put in big printing letters like that?)

"Yes, a Revel and a feminine acquaintance—whom we will call 'O'—have almost made me decide to go back to ginger ale and apollinaris, and to leave 'fermented grape juice' alone. I will leave it alone unless—well, unless my poor old mind gets troubled too much by seeing The Truth!

"I believe that it's nearly always The Truth which is responsible for making people drink and take drugs.

"I went to a party at a Studio and practically all the people there were under the influence of Boy Bacchus in his most devilish mood. They looked and said and did the most horrible things, and when I went home afterwards with 'O' she actually deluged her hair and shoulders with the spirit she was no longer able to swallow!

"I decided then to give it up. How long the decision will hold good, I can't say, because I am beginning to have an idea that when this particular habit is once acquired it is more difficult to break *entirely* than any other. I believe if ever I were perfectly happy and perfectly sure and secure of my happiness I shouldn't have any more use for my newly-acquired vice.

"I wonder if I am ever going to be happy, and sure and secure of my happiness. I wonder if E. will disappoint me, or if I shall find him out in something disillusioning which will make me fly once more to Boy Bacchus for rest and comfort.

"I should like to know exactly what you imagine me to be. As I am absolutely truthful and sincere with you—mainly, I expect, because we have never met—I don't suppose you look upon me as what is commonly known as a 'bad lot.' I hope you don't, because I am less like a 'bad lot' than anyone in the world. I am quite exaggeratedly honest, to the extent of paying for things before I get them—if people will only let me. I wouldn't do a bad turn to anyone (unless they did a bad turn to me, and then—oh! dear!). I am beautifully broad-minded, and I am extraordinarily moral so far as the masculine sex is concerned—and it is this last-named morality or immorality which mainly concerns a woman being, or not being, a bad lot, isn't it?

"Would you believe that now, at this very moment, I am feeling soiled on account of an experimental kiss? It was the first kiss—with the exception of E.'s—which has come my way since the early days of my unsatisfactory marriage, and I only permitted it in order to compare it with E.'s kisses.

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"What do you think of that for cold-blooded introspection? Horrid, wasn't it? And the kiss itself was more horrid still, except that it did seem to tell me what I had wanted to know—viz. : that E.'s kisses were different from others, and that they seemed strong with something I like to regard as genuine affection.

"Oh! heavens! if ever I were to be secure of genuine affection for Me Myself, what a joyous and vivifying thing it would be.

Oh! my dear friend, how I do give myself away to you, don't I? And how I revel in doing it! And how horrified some people—E. among them, of course!—would be if they could read all the bald, bare truths with which I humiliate myself to you! But it helps me tremendously, and I have a strange feeling that I was meant to do it for some purpose—that to pour out the truth to you may mean the ultimate security of my own peace of mind.

"Probably this is merely hysterical imagination, but it is what I feel—and I like to feel it!

"Good-bye, dear friend, for to-day.

"From the supreme egoist,

"ELSA JOHNSON."

A great satisfaction to have written all that! A most helpful outlet! A real relief not to mind being absolutely irrational and ridiculous before a fellow-creature—at least, not actually *before* him, but almost the same thing!

Elsa addressed and stamped her letter, and was just going out to post it when her eye was attracted by a small framed picture which she had never noticed before. The reason, probably, that she had never noticed it before was that it had been almost hidden by a folded-up screen, which Mrs. Stockley had now taken into the bedroom.

Just a bunch of grapes, nothing more, and beneath them the words "GREEN GRAPES," and under these, in parentheses, "LA CONSOLATION."

Elsa moved closer and stared at the picture—an engraving which reproduced the vivid, yet melting, tint of the fruit with quite extraordinary accuracy.

"*La Consolation*"—what solace? Why should a bunch of green grapes be a solace unless—unless it was a case of looking ahead to the time when all the juice should be extracted for purposes of fermentation!

It must be that; there could be no other meaning, and it was simply devilish of Destiny to put this small but insinuating reminder in the way of a person who had just decided to resist the wiles of Boy Bacchus!

Green Grapes

"*Green Grapes*"—now whenever Elsa saw a bunch of luscious green grapes she would think of them as *La Consolation*—and when she thought of them as *La Consolation* she would remember what a boon and blessing it was to know of some certain solace which could be relied upon to do good work when a solace was required!

"*Green Grapes*"—a picturesque and innocent way of recalling such incidents as the Revel at the Studio and Olga Heamick's shower bath of brandy!

"*Green Grapes*"—Elsa would try not to think of them, also she would try not to dream of them.

But the picture was disturbing—at least, if not actually disturbing, it was a reminder!

CHAPTER XXIV

TO DO WITH AN OUTING

THE next morning Elsa received this letter:

" Beloved of my Heart,

" I have been suddenly called away, so to-morrow's arrangements must be postponed. I am writing this half an hour after leaving you, and I am telling myself that though we can't meet to-morrow, it will be before many to-morrows have passed, and that during the interval probably my devotion will have increased twenty per cent. No, I don't think it could increase, because it has already reached the extreme possible limits of man's devotion to woman, but perhaps the interval may give you time to find a little more for me. I know you love me, dearest of my own—oh! yes, I am quite sure of that!—but I am ready for you to love me much more!

" E. A."

That was all, and when Elsa had finished reading she felt her spirits sink in exactly the way that a landscape grows grey directly the sun goes in. Something seemed to drop and send a chill straight to her heart.

The letter breathed of all the tenderness, ardour and devotion that any woman could demand, yet—yet—well,

Green Grapes

why had he been called away suddenly ? Why shouldn't he say why he had been called away, and where ? Who should have such a hold over him that he must immediately change his plans and go where he was required to go ? Was he going to the same place where his unexpected week-ends were spent ? Where was that place ? Who was at that place ?

All these questions ran through Elsa's brain with bewildering rapidity.

Then came others :—

“ Why didn't he want to know where I had been spending my time while I was away ? Wasn't it because if he were to ask questions of me I should be justified in asking questions of him ? For all he knows, I might have been with a man—a husband even, or someone who wasn't a husband ! He has no guarantee that I am even partially respectable and decent, and he doesn't seem to want one ! And what should make him not want one except the fact that he isn't prepared to give one of himself ? Is it that he daren't demand much because he can't give much ? As a general rule things are that way. An honest person will demand scrupulous honesty of his *employés*, while a rogue will wink at dirty deals. An immaculate wife will cut a *divorcée*, but one who has her own little diversions is quite prepared not to condemn others who have theirs. An idle waster excuses other idle wasters, while the strenuous worker slave-drives unmercifully. . . . Yes, the person who is *sincerely* lenient in his judgment of others is usually the person who would need the world to be lenient in its judgment of him, just as when a man-lover demands nothing of faithfulness and purity from the woman-lover it means that she must not expect either from him. And Edward Arkenson neither demands nor asks anything of me—doesn't ask anything—doesn't say anything ! ”

For a moment Elsa put both hands to her head with an almost consciously dramatic gesture of abandon, then crossed the room and faced the picture of “ Green Grapes.”

The solace—the solace !

Then she looked at the door of the small oak sideboard

Green Grapes

in the recess—the door behind which there was a shelf holding bottles and glasses—then with a sudden rush of impulse she opened the green front door and “the oak” and ran up the stairs to Tim Haven’s abode on the top floor.

“Ah! I am glad to see you!” he cried, answering her knock almost before she had knocked. He spoke deliberately and pedantically as usual, but there was real welcome in his tones.

“That’s what I came to make you say even if you meant it or not! Also I’ve come to ask you to take me out somewhere, or talk to me or entertain me—to be so diverting that I shan’t want to do anything I shouldn’t do. Will you please ‘take me on’ for a little while?”

“I will both ‘take you on’ and ‘take you off,’ dear lady—that is, if you will consent to be taken off to the Docks!”

“The Docks! Of course! Lovely! But why the Docks?”

“Because I have got to see a man there and to make investigations for the purpose of getting some special information, and if, while I am busy, you can amuse your charming self looking at entertaining and instructive things, nothing could be better. You can inspect the ivory storehouses and the spices and the museum; and I’ll see, if we call at the Port of London Office, if they’ll give a pass for you to see the Crescent Vaults—a really wonderful sight!”

“Vaults? What sort of vaults?”

“Cellars—”

“Cellars? What sort of cellars?” This was asked with almost breathless eagerness.

“Wine Cellars—where all the wine shipped into the country is kept in bond until cleared by the shippers. The magnitude of the place is inconceivable to anyone who hasn’t seen it.”

Elsa nodded, and smiled mechanically.

Was this a devil’s trick organised by Boy Bacchus, the King of Green Grapes? Did he feel that his latest capture might be slipping away and must therefore be lured back

Green Grapes

by means of some picturesque experience which would appeal to the emotional and imaginative side of her absurdly impressionable nature?

To go once more into the very arms of the Wine God! To again touch the very heart of the Wine God—to inhale his breath—to feel his kindly soothing kisses—

“You can be ready in ten minutes, I take it?”

This was Tim's mild way of accepting a decision before it was made.

“Yes,” answered Elsa quietly, “I can be ready in ten minutes.”

* * * * *

At the great, grey, awe-inspiring Port of London Offices Tim secured Elsa's pass, then they taxi-ed Eastward to the Docks.

“The worst of this sort of environment and that sort of place”—(here Elsa nodded a little resentfully in the direction of the Tower)—“is that they seem so forcibly to bring home the nothingness of women! When I'm in the West End—among the milliners and dressmakers and theatres and tea-shops and other diverting institutions—I feel that London is mainly run for me, to amuse and clothe and feed *me*! But directly I get down here it's made horribly plain that, except for the purpose of giving birth to men citizens, women are very unimportant details. Horses—dear things, I hate to see them dragging and slipping and scraping over those rough stones!—matter infinitely more than we do.”

“Yes, this is not the woman's end, I admit,” replied Tim, screwing up his eyes and looking judicial, “at least not on the surface. But later on you may change your views and see that your own charming sex is the main factor for creating the demand which the less decorative sex works to supply. Now here we are!”

Yes, here they were in the very heart of a world which was as new to ordinary West-end-bred women as a Himalayan jungle would have been.

All around everything as vast as it could be—enormous—gargantuan—overpowering.

Green Grapes

Large men with large voices, large horses, huge buildings, huge yards, immense carts and trucks and trolleys, enormous walls and gates and iron bells and doorways—everything to demonstrate the colossal magnitude of a small island !

For a moment Tim left Elsa standing at the side of one of these huge yards while he went into the only small doorway visible, then he came out again accompanied by a slim young man with a gentle girlish face.

“ This is the lady who would like to see all there is to see, Mr. Grill,” he said. The slim young man raised his hat and Elsa smiled. “ I shan’t be kept more than three-quarters of an hour, but if you will kindly keep Mrs. Johnson entertained during that time, I shall be very much obliged.”

Mr. Grill said that he would do his best and Mrs. Johnson thanked Mr. Grill, then Tim went off and the entertainment of Mrs. Johnson began.

First of all a huge light glass-roofed building with its thousands and thousands of pounds worth of ivory stored in sections, piles, sacks, barrels, and on the shelves—the legacy left to mankind by great dead beasts many of which (those not pressed into the service of the human labour market) had died in the grand silent secrecy of the forests as they had lived.

And the storekeeper told Elsa wonderful stories of how in those forests were found towering heaps of gleaming white which would prove to be the tusks of many elephants who, when their span of life was run, would meet in mute conclave to lie down and die together restfully and naturally as they had lived—as though the good pachydermatous veterans had decided to make things as easy as possible for the traders who sought to secure material for the manufacture of chessmen, piano keys, portrait frames, bangles and other similar articles which humanity could just as well do without !

And the baby tusks were pathetic-looking little things, and the giant ones—sawn off so that the splendid forest king should be better fitted to take part in royal Eastern pageants and to carry black princes—were impressive. Elsa felt strangely in sympathy with the either dead or

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denuded animals who, without protest, had given the best of themselves to help create the wealth of East and West.

The ivory—shining, gleaming, projecting where God had put it—was useful and splendid. The ivory, lying in piled-up heaps ready to be made into the silly demands of civilization—seemed futile and unnecessary.

But as Elsa Johnson-Carr never thought normally and comfortably about anything it was not surprising that she should take this, or some other, *outré* view of a most useful and profitable industry !

Then in the warehouses set aside for the storing of oils and spices her imagination ran such riot that she could picture herself in many places where she had never been, and though it was a trifle disillusioning to learn that some passionately perfumed rose-oil which seemed to recall all the scented sonnets of Omar was used merely for imparting pleasant fragrance to over-advertised laundry soaps, she was able to extract much sensuous pleasure from the combined odours of cinnamon, rose, jasmine and a dozen other concentrated oils which affected the olfactory senses much as a kaleidoscope affects the eyesight. A jumble of perfumes—a jumble of colours !

“ And now we might go here, I think,” said Mr. Grill, leading the way across a vast paved yard to a long high narrow doorway.

“ What is this—grain—or—cereals ? ” enquired Elsa, wanting to seem intelligent and not quite knowing how.

But though Mr. Grill didn’t answer the question because the noise from two lumbering thundering vans prevented his hearing it, Elsa *knew*—knew directly they plunged into the cool darkness and began to descend a flight of comparatively narrow steps.

All the perfumes of cinnamon, rose, clove and jasmine were forgotten and Elsa only realised that once again the half maddening, half-lulling odour of wine was surrounding her on every side.

Once again she was inside the home of Boy Bacchus—but this time the finest and most important of his abodes.

A dear aged cat, who had lived fourteen years among the vats and bins and barrels without developing any inebriate

Green Grapes

tastes, hobbled up to greet her politely. Some courteous official informed her that the cat's name was "Chirgwin"—of course, the white patch over his left eye should have made such information unnecessary!—and that he was responsible for the demise of unlimited rats.

Elsa stroked Chirgwin, then begged to be excused carrying one of the long cellar candlesticks which was being thrust into her hand. But kindly and firmly she was told that it was necessary for her to take the candlestick, for the reason that, as a certain number of candlesticks were always kept in the rack, it was possible at night when counting them over to see if that same number were in their place. If they were not it would be known that one candlestick taken out had not been returned, and that, consequently, one straying individual was roaming about in the vast dark wilderness of Bacchus's best castle.

"Perhaps I shall stray away," she observed to the official who insisted upon the candlestick being taken.

"I don't think you will, madam, because we always keep pretty close to our visitors in case they should be tempted to lose themselves," was the guarded reply, whereat Elsa resigned herself to the fact that romantic and even dangerous adventure was impossible in the Crescent Wine Vaults. . . .

Down they went, down—further and further into such limitlessness of gloom and strange shapes that recollecting the Carmena and Hoyce cellars seemed like recalling something almost dainty and miniature.

Acres and oceans of vats and bins and barrels—a pipe of port bulging like some pot-bellied, over-fed brown beast—and everywhere and all around the white, seductively scented, drooping fungi, imparting half-enervating, half-exhilarating perfume and assuming mysterious uncanny shapes.

A woman's body—an angel's wings—a sailing boat—a harp—all these shapes Elsa seemed to trace and make out, and just near one of the curved arches she found a bunch of green grapes.

Yes, here the fungi had taken on quite a curious green hue, and seemed to have curved and formed itself into

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the semblance of a bunch of green grapes—like the grapes in the picture—or it might be that her own absurdly imaginative brain was conjuring up just what it thought most fitting and effective to conjure and—and—and—

Then suddenly Elsa felt as though she was going raving mad—as though somewhere out of the wine-perfumed endless gloom voices were calling, voices which she must answer, voices which she must obey.

“Why give it up? Why be a fool and give up the only solace you have ever found? ‘*La Consolation*’—this is the other name for green grapes, from which grape juice—to become ‘*fermented* grape juice’!—is extracted. If it were not fine and desirable and intended by the Supreme Organiser of the Universe that men and women should be made glad by wine all that you see before you and around you and beyond you and above you wouldn’t exist. These great vaults were planned and built and stocked because ‘*fermented grape juice*’ is a justifiable human need. Forget Olga Heamick, forget the ugly scenes at the Revel, and remember only that a tortured brain can gain rest at the hands of merry Boy Bacchus—the king of this enchanted castle. Go back and find your happiness—go back and find it—”

“Here, madam, please, this way!”

This definitely authoritative instruction was shouted by the voice of a man and not sung by the voice of a god—and suddenly Elsa realised that in unconscious obedience to a soundless call, she had darted ahead into the gloom, rushing so swiftly that her candle had become extinguished, while she herself had almost disappeared from the sight of her companions.

But dodging between giant vats and passing behind a gargantuan pipe of port didn’t hide her from their penetrating gaze. She was called and then overtaken—and now, of course, she must treat her moment of mental aberration as a joke.

“It was no good my trying to create a sensation by getting lost in the Crescent Vaults, was it?” she cried gaily. “It was very unkind to bring me back when I might have gained any amount of notoriety if I could have

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hidden here all night and been found in the morning quite unaccountable for my actions!"

This flippancy was, of course, quite absurd and out of place, but Elsa couldn't hide her embarrassment in any other way. For she felt curiously embarrassed, curiously merry and—suddenly—curiously anxious to get away.

And why anxious to get away? Was it because a suddenly born desire was impossible of fulfilment? Was it because here, surrounded on every side by wine, it was impossible to drink? And was it because the wine odours reaching her from every side demanded that she must drink?

Yes, yes, that was it! Her throat ached that wine might pass down it, and here with bulging "pipes" and vats and barrels, behind and in front, not one drop was procurable.

If she stopped another second she must do something scandalous—ask for drink—clamour for it—clamour, positively clamour—

"I—I'm afraid I don't feel very well—may I get out as quickly as possible?" she panted.

Mr. Grill and the others answered to the effect that on several occasions visitors had found the wine fumes to be overpowering—and a few minutes later she was once more standing in the paved yard just as Tim Haven came out of the office where he had been getting his required information.

She went up to him, and whispered:

"Take me home—I must go back at once, and *drink*! Tim, I know it now—nothing can alter it—I trained myself to drink, and now I am a *drunkard*—a drunkard who must drink, who can't help drinking, who can't be kept from drinking—take me back—*now*—take me back to my picture of Green Grapes—to my only consolation!"

Tim blinked a little, nodded, and took her back—thinking deeply all the time.

But he didn't show that he was thinking deeply—he was far too clever a man to commit so grave an error as that.

Green Grapes

CHAPTER XXV

TO DO WITH A KISS THAT NEARLY WASN'T KISSED

Two days went by. They were ugly days for Elsa Johnson-Carr—two of the ugliest, perhaps, that her life had ever known—and on the dawn of the third she awoke feeling languid and old.

A bout!—that's what it had been, a real drinking bout! She hadn't poured anything over her hair and gloatingly closed her eyes while cool trickles ran down her shoulders and breast—no, she wasn't nearly so far gone as that yet awhile!—but she had drunk—God! *how* she had drunk

While Mrs. Stockley cleaned the place Elsa lay in bed, and she continued lying in bed for some time after breakfast had been brought and the charlady had gone up to Tim Haven.

Then she got up and looked in the glass.

The nightdress she was wearing was very filmy and white, and her own face and neck were very white, and her hair was very black, and the lines under her eyes were very purple.

She didn't form a very cheering combination of tints, because even her usually red lips were greyishly mauve.

"That's what a newly, but full-fledged drunkard looks like!" she murmured almost aloud—then with a sigh of physical weariness, she set about bathing and dressing and beginning to live the day. It wouldn't be an inspiring day, because—well, because it wouldn't bring anything that was worth doing.

She might go home, of course, but that wasn't worth doing. She might stay where she was, but that—in the present circumstances—also wasn't worth doing!

Edward still away!—it might be that, so far as she was concerned, he would stay away. And it was no good tiring herself with further speculation as to who he was with or what he was doing.

Just for the moment nothing seemed worth while, which perhaps might be accounted for by the sensation of physical

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languor which she was experiencing and which, of course, would soon pass away.

But it didn't pass away. It kept with her while she bathed and dressed, and when—clothed in a dull mauve *peignoir* with her hair hanging in one thick plait down her back—she went into the sitting-room the sensation of inertness became positively acute.

Tea wouldn't do any good, coffee wouldn't do any good—besides, even if they would, there was no one at hand to make them—so there was nothing left but—but—

“*A hair of the dog that bit you!*” More than one cheery commonplace individual Elsa had heard make use of this phrase, and now it seemed to suggest exactly what she knew needed suggesting.

“The dog which bit” her had been “fermented grape juice,” and the same ferocious canine was now waiting in the sideboard ready to repeat his attack.

Last night's “dog” had been a red “dog” with a mellow pungent aroma—to-day's “dog” should be a yellow “dog,” a gassy sparkling fuzzy animal.

Yes, champagne drunk out of the glass with the roughly-cut star would be the only pick-me-up which, on this particular morning, could be relied upon to do any picking up.

So Elsa opened a bottle—opened it with a neatness and dexterity very surprising in the case of a young woman who was more undomesticated and, in some respects, useless than any young woman had ever been before—and, having opened it, she drank.

It was a very refreshing, stimulating and “bucking-up” drink, and by the time Elsa had consumed a second glass she began to feel less dissatisfied with the world in general and herself in particular.

Then she filled her glass a third time and was just raising it to her lips when a knock sounded on the green front door—which meant that Mrs. Stockley had left open “the oak” thus giving tacit permission for callers to call.

But who could be the caller when Edward was away, and Tim had gone down to Leicester for the day, and no one else knew of her retreat?

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Elsa put down her glass and, on going out into the narrow dark passage distinctly heard the sound of a masculine cough—a cough that had no connection with a cold but was merely an evidence of existence and propinquity.

And it wasn't Tim's funny little short dry clearing of the throat, so it must be—

Elsa paused, listened longer, silenced the faint sound of her own breathing and stole back to the sitting-room—stole back because there was something she wanted to hide.

It was a bottle and the glass—she didn't want anyone to see the bottle and the glass, because anyone who saw those would know that she had been drinking.

And at last it had become so much of a need for her to drink that she wanted to hide it. At first, when the idea was new and incongruous and out of place with her own tastes and habits, she had found quite a good deal of pleasurable pride in advertising her recently acquired taste for alcohol, but now all of a sudden it assumed the proportions of a guilty secret which at all costs must be hidden.

Whatever happened no one in the world must know that suddenly she had been seized by a desire to drink in private. This was a secret she had got with herself, and it must be kept.

When all traces of the mid-morning refreshment had been removed Elsa went back into the passage and opened the inner green door.

Of course it was Edward Arkenson who came in!—of course!!

“Good morning!” said Elsa, a little aggressively. (It always becomes necessary to show an aggressive front when we have any sort of a guilty secret to keep.)

“Good morning, my darling!” answered Edward, coming towards her to claim the embrace which he now regarded as his right.

Then suddenly Elsa was seized by a panic of alarm—because if once he were to kiss her before she could get at the mouth wash in the bathroom, her secret wouldn't be a secret any longer.

“No,” she said entrenching herself behind the table that ran down the room not quite in the centre.

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“Why no ? ” (Yes, why—why ? What excuse should she make ?)

“Because I don’t think—er—er—it’s—it’s decorous for a gentleman to kiss a lady who is wearing a loose morning wrap ” (That was a truly ingenious idea !)

“Oh ! I don’t think there’s anything very immoral in that. After all, kissing between lovers is a very natural evidence of ardour, and wearing loose gowns is more natural than wearing tight ones ! Let’s keep to Nature as much as we can ! ”

“No, I’ve grown very stiff and conventional while you’ve been away ! ”

“What a pity ! I’ve not grown anything except twice as much in love with you. And because I’m in love with you I’m going to kiss you. I must—I can’t wait another moment ! Elsa, remember we are lovers, and don’t spoil your own fine frank fearlessness by pretending that we are not. Come round this side of the table and let us be close together. I’ve been dreaming of being close to you again—of holding you—of touching you ! God ! when a man loves a woman as I love you nothing is any good except to *touch* her—to feel her warm skin and—and—Elsa, *come !* ”

And oh ! how wily she was ! Such cunning, such stealthy cunning when she made pretence of moving to meet him by the side of the table nearest the window, then when they were within a couple of feet of each other, darting back again, slipping round the further side and dashing out of the door, down the passage and into the bedroom.

It was all done with a deftness and agility which any fifteen-year old flapper might envy.

“I shan’t be three minutes ! ” she called out through the door which she had locked. “I must put on decorous attire ! ”

And having said she must put on “decorous attire ” she must do it. At least, so long as the attire was different Edward would never notice if the white morning wrap which she now proposed to slip on was more or less loose than the mauve one she was now slipping off . . .

There, the change of toilet was complete ! It’s true that the creamy lace and muslin *peignoir* was an even more

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ashable garment than the other had been, but that didn't matter—the change justified her action.

And now having got through pretences there was the real motive for her escape to be tackled—the odour of drink to be expelled from her lips.

Good heavens ! suppose that she smelt as the small journalist lady at the Revel had described a drunkard's breath—"rotting cabbage, decaying fungi, decomposing rats and sour trifle made with rum."

No, no, it wasn't like that—only years of soaking achieve such odoriferous results !—but the—the—the—the effluvia —(yes, "effluvia" was a very pretty word !) must be dispelled.

Peroxide of hydrogen ? Yes, here it was on the mantelpiece—the most perfect cleanser in the world which should never be absent from any toilet table. Mix it with water—half and half—and now gargle !

Elsa threw back her head, and for a moment came a sound like the monotonous warbling of some deep-throated bird.

Then suddenly she stopped—for though the doors and walls were thick there seemed just a possibility that sound might penetrate.

The Eau de Rose mouth-wash—advertised in every glazed ladies' paper in England—was then pressed into the service, and a few seconds later Elsa felt that she might receive a kiss of lover's greeting without any fear that her secret vice might be discovered.

And suddenly it came to her that she was viler and more nauseous than any woman had ever been before. So deliberate, all of it !—nothing rash and impulsive and the outcome of unthought-out folly, but a carefully planned campaign of—of—of sensuality ! (An ugly word this time, but one that must be used !)

For it *was* sensual to drink as she drank and for the reasons that she drank, and presumably it was sensual to long for a lover's kiss as she was longing for it now !

No, no, this last wasn't sensuality—it was *love* !—the love of one individual. For sensuality is akin to promiscuity and the thought of being kissed by any lips other than the

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lips of Edward Arkenson made her cold as any disapproving worker of good deeds.

And it wasn't sensual to drink "fermented grape juice" in order to throw a gossamer veil over the hideous outline of truth and realism—no, it wasn't, it *wasn't*!

Without doubt she (Elsa) was thinking much more badly of herself than she had any need to think!

She would go back to be kissed.

So she unlocked the bedroom and went straight to the sitting-room where she found Edward examining an old book which he had taken down from the shelf.

"Have you ever read this?" he asked, paying no more heed to her entry than if she had never left the room.

"What is it?" (She was ready now—why should there be delay?)

"'The History of Holborn.' It's extraordinary how one can live in London and know comparatively little about it." (Yes, yes—well, these were sentiments Elsa had heard before! Why couldn't he put down the book now that she had come back?) "Now, I never knew about Inigo Jones making the square the same size as the Great Pyramid or that—"

"Oh! *don't* give me extracts from guide books so early in the day!"

Elsa didn't like snappy women, but there were moments when snappiness couldn't be restrained.

Edward laughed like a merry boy and shut the volume with a bang.

"I was only trying to improve my own mind, dearest." (Yes, the "dearest" came easily, but why not—why not?)

"Well, don't do that when you come to see me!"

"I won't—you shall do it for me!" (Ah! he meant that his mind should be improved through his heart!) "Yes, you improve my mind and brain and everything else by playing to me! I first loved you when your fiddle called out to me—let it call out again!"

"In the morning! How could any fiddle possibly call out and say anything in the morning?"

("First loved her"—what was the use of saying that

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when it was obvious that he had forgotten entirely what loving meant !)

“ Try it and see—you’ll find it will have something to say to me ! ”

And so it should—it should have something to say to him ! It should jeer at him and gibe at him and tell him that to speak of loving he must learn what loving meant !

So Elsa seized the violin and made it state views and enunciate theories and say all sorts of unpleasant things which she would be much too nice and ladylike to speak with her own lips.

“ You fool ! you fool ! ” grunted the G string hoarsely and raucously. “ Why chase a woman round a table, and then when she no longer needs any chasing, forget what you chased her for ? Can’t you see that what you are doing is humiliating ?—and no woman ever forgives a man who humiliates her ! ” Then the E string quivered a reproach. “ What is the use of life if one doesn’t take love when it’s there to be taken ? It isn’t always there, or always real, or always true, and if it is allowed to slip by there is a chance it may never come again. Think before you let it go—think ! ” But the D string interrupted crossly, and the A string joined in : “ Silly fool ! silly fool ! What’s the good of being a silly fool ! You’ll be hated soon—hated and detested and not wanted ! ”

And so the strings spoke their mind—at least, the mind of the player who lashed them with the bow—until at last Elsa threw aside the fiddle, putting it down more roughly than she had ever done before.

“ What a great artist you could be if you wanted to ! ” observed Arkenson looking at her with blue eyes that seemed positively ablaze with the light of life.

“ Perhaps I *do* want to ! ”

“ Oh ! no, you don’t—you don’t want anything like that.”

“ You appear very penetrating on the matter of my desires and non-desires.”

“ I am. You are so well worth being penetrating about.” By this time he had got up and reached the door. “ And am I to lunch alone or will you lunch with me, dearest ? ”

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(The "dearest" was all right, but that might be force of habit—general habit !)

"If I am the alternative, you will lunch alone. I am not inclined to go out at the moment."

"Then, darling, if you are not inclined to come I am not inclined to have you ! So *au revoir* until—er—until—oh ! very soon ! Now that you are back again life won't be a continual waste of time and energy in coming up the stairs to find She-who-isn't-here-to-be-found ! Good-bye, dearest !"

He was gone !

In a flash he had passed from the sitting-room, across the passage, and out of the green front door, and now he was gone—but not gone as a lover would go !

Had he forgotten, or was it that he didn't want to ?

He *had* wanted to when he first came in, but after being temporarily baulked and eluded the desire seemed to have left his mind.

Perhaps he was such a general distributor of lover's kisses that one more or less made no difference in the scheme of his gallantry ?

And now suddenly it seemed to Elsa that to-day she wanted love and tenderness more than ever she had wanted it before. She felt seared and soiled and tired. Restlessness was raging within her—such restlessness that it might almost be the precursor of madness.

What should she do with herself ? What *should* she do ?

Boy Bacchus couldn't help her—for the moment she was weary of him, and peroxide of hydrogen and Eau de Rose mouth-wash had been called upon to free her lips from the taint of his kisses.

She couldn't "let loose" on the fiddle because that had just been done and there would be no more fervour left on the strings.

But there was one emotional outlet which she hadn't tried for years—the salt and watery one of tears ! Crying is always feeble and futile, but when one is a woman and lonely and dissatisfied with one's management of one's own life it is often a tremendous help to disregard red eyelids and a purple nose and to splash out cascades of tears.

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So Elsa sat down on the deep cretonne-covered couch and splashed out cascades of tears—in such torrents they came down that, whimsically and pathetically, she found herself wondering if they were to any extent charged with an overplus of champagne!

Then just as the cascade shewed signs of merging into a waterfall and the accompanying sobs grew quite harsh and raucous, Elsa became conscious of the fate that an extremely strong and firm hand was being laid on either shoulder.

She didn't start or scream because in one instant she realised that the latch of the green front door had—according to frequent custom—not done its duty, that Edward had come in again and that Edward was now leaning over the back of the couch.

“Are you crying because I went away without kissing you?”

(It would be so futile and “flapper-ish” to lie or prevaricate! Why should she?)

“Yes—yes!”

“That's right, darling, I hoped you would. You deserve to. Any woman deserves to cry when she won't let herself be kissed by such a very exclusive man as I am. You ought to think yourself extremely lucky that I want to kiss you and only you, because though you personally are ten thousand times more desirable than I could ever be even if I were changed into a fairy-tale prince or some chap like that, still I am a man—and because I am a man I could kiss at least three-quarters of the women in the world. Any average sort of man could! Candid and truthful, isn't it, darling?”

“Yes—s—s.”

“That's right. And now you won't run round a table and dash into another room, will you?”

“I c—c—couldn't wh-hile you are holding me down.”

“Neither could you! Well, I won't hold you any more. Now you are quite free to run away, aren't you?”

“Y—y—yes.”

“And are you going to?”

“No—no—no.”

“Why, darling—*why*?”

“Because I w—w—want——”

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That was enough. He had got his own back. The incident of an escape round a table was avenged.

"And I want to, darling; I want with all the heart that beats because you are my love! Dearest—dearest!"

And this consolation was sweeter and more potent than the consolation of green grapes!

CHAPTER XXVI

TO DO WITH A PISTOL

"Dear Poet-Philosopher,

"I am frightened. This is about the first time I have ever been really afraid in all my life, and the experience is unnerving. And the reason I am afraid is because I have got a secret.

"Heavens! it's a horrible secret, and I do hope, dear friend, that you will never have one. A secret is such a strange sort of thing. To create a real secret one must, to begin with, do something one is ashamed of doing, and secondly, there must be a person of sufficient importance for that something to be concealed from.

"And what I am ashamed of doing is drinking—and the person from whom I want to conceal my drunkenness is E. Only a couple of days ago he came to see me and to kiss me, and because I had been drinking I ran away from the kiss—presumably to change my frock, but really to rinse out my mouth.

"Doesn't that sound loathsome?

"At first I was proud of being a drunkard, as one is proud of any newly acquired achievement which, so far, hasn't taken any fierce hold upon one's imagination; but now that I *must* drink and *can't keep from* drinking, I am getting ashamed and afraid.

"Sometimes I wonder if I could leave it off if I tried intensely hard, but I soon realise that I couldn't. It is as though Bacchus was avenging himself for all the slights I have put upon him in the past, and now that he has got me in his grip nothing will make him let go.

"As you know, I acquired this habit deliberately—took it on as a hobby, as it were—and without realising fully to what extent it would cling and stick on when once acquired. I thought that if I could overcome my rabid horror of all intoxicants and just drink when drink would have a soothing effect on my too vivid imagination, all would be well. But it hasn't proved like that. It has got a grip of me and I can't think where that grip will end.

"It's strange, too, how, if ever I manage to keep myself in hand for a few days—if some hideous example or result gives me strength to do so—there will inevitably appear some lure to drag me back again by means of playing on my imagination.

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"It may be an accidental visit to a place where wine fumes abound, or a picture of green grapes, and called 'La Consolation,' or anything else like that to tease and tickle my thoughts till I think of nothing and feel nothing but the strong fervent craving for wine or spirits.

"And this is the secret which I must hide from my lover. 'Lover' is the right word, for a lover is a person whom one loves and who loves one in return.

"And I love E. very intensely, and I am beginning to feel that his love for me is something not passing or valueless. I don't think I ever want to be a wife again—my first experience was too futile and disillusioning—yet what other binding tie can there be with a man one wants to possess and to keep other women from possessing?

"A mistress!—well, the tie of lover and mistress *may* be permanent, but there is nothing to ensure it, and I begin to feel (E. has made me feel it) that even if passion wanes and satiety creates certain feelings of impatient boredom there is strength and satisfaction to be gained from the legal tie.

"The person who lives in a country and disregards its laws—no matter how grotesquely unsatisfactory those laws may be—is at a horrible disadvantage. A law-breaker can't keep anything worth keeping, therefore as this E. whom I love *is* worth keeping—he himself, even if his spirit breaks away—I am beginning to feel that the laws of my land might be a useful help.

"Of course, he may be married already—much married, many children!—but somehow I don't think that is the case. It's most extraordinary, but for the first time in my life I am beginning to believe a fellow-creature, and just when I can't break away from a habit which I acquired for the purpose of deadening my over-acute perception!

"Oh! my good, clever friend, Annock Bee, what an intense relief it is to pour out all, *all* that I feel, to someone who I know sympathises without lecturing. Never once have you written that I am a weak-minded egoistical fool, and I thank you for it from my heart.

"And now to continue my egoistical outpourings.

"This secret of mine is making me furtive. I find myself looking up quickly and slyly to see if there is any sign that E. realises me to be a drunkard; when we dine together I insist upon having lemonade, so that he may not see with what eager relish I swallow wine; if he puts his face near to mine I shut my mouth with box-like tightness for fear that some give-away odour may escape my lips.

"A dozen times a day I look in the glass to see if my nose is getting red at the end, and if my eyes show signs of puffiness, and if any roughness or scaliness is appearing on my skin. So far, thank heaven, I don't see any signs of these catastrophes, but I suppose that's because I haven't been a drunkard long enough. It's such a short time since I began, isn't it? I don't suppose

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anybody acquired a real vice so quickly, do you? And I don't suppose that anybody except a fanatical anti-drunkard, such as I was, would have acquired it so quickly. Reaction always produces rapid results.

"*Rien ne pese tant qu'un secret*—that's what La Fontaine says isn't it? (Or is it La Roche?—no, I'm sure it's La Fontaine!) And nothing more true was ever said. The weight of a secret is colossal, and as I carry mine I feel like a poor little coster's donkey, almost submerged by the towering pile of sacks he is forced to draw. And, just as the donkey can't get away from his burden, so I can't get away from mine. It's getting bigger, too, bigger and bigger, and when it gets so big that it can't be hidden from E. any longer, I shall do something very dramatic in the way of suicide or emigration! (I don't suppose I shall really, but it sounds effective to say so!)

"What I want to do is to marry E.! I feel sure of that now, yet I daren't try to bring it about because of my secret. It wouldn't do to let him marry a drunkard, besides he'd find out—oh! heaven, yes, he'd find out!

"I won't write any more now because I am going to see the woman I told you about, and whom I call 'O.' I haven't seen her for some time, and just as one actor or artist is interested in the progress of another actor or artist, so one drunkard is interested in the progress of another drunkard.

"*Au revoir*, dear Poet-Philosopher, and when you write do tell me about yourself.

"From

"ELSA JOHNSON."

When Elsa had finished writing and addressing her letter she looked aimlessly out of the window and thought about home. That decently appointed and more or less luxurious home seemed to be farther away now than it had ever been. True, it was only two or three days since she had left it, but so tight was she getting in the grip of the Gray's Inn self that the Burlford Grange self seemed gradually to be ceasing to exist.

Clare Carter was the good nice fairy looking after the Burlford Grange self and Tim Haven was the good nice fairy looking after the Gray's Inn self. It wasn't easy to define *how* they either of them looked after either of the selves, but there was the feeling that in both cases a certain amount of looking after was going on.

Elsa felt grateful to them both but really she had no particular use for either of them!

Heaven above! what *had* she got a use for?

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“ Is Lady Heamick at home ? ”

Elsa put this question to the hall porter at the Hotel Radium, and was immediately conducted up to the suite on the first floor where, as usual, the page left her after ringing the bell of Lady Heamick’s own particular front door.

And on this occasion the door was opened by Bateman almost before the page had returned to the lift.

“ Is Lady Heamick in ? ” enquired Elsa.

Then for the first time in her well-trained life Bateman appeared flustered and alarmed.

“ Y—yes, madam, she is in—in bed—I was just wondering what I ought to do as her ladyship seems worse th—than she’s ever been before. I know she speaks of you as a great friend so if you would come in and see her—I thought of sending for the doctor, but once before when I did that there was a terrible fuss afterwards. Do you mind seeing her ladyship, madam ? ”

Of course Elsa understood, and felt a depraved interest in seeing a fellow-woman drunkard in an advanced state of drink.

Probably poor Olga would be either more pugilistic or more maudlin than she had ever been before.

“ Yes, I will see her ladyship if she won’t mind.”

“ I—I can’t say what she’ll do, madam, but perhaps the sight of you may quiet her. Will you come this way, please.”

Elsa followed and was shewn into the best bedroom of the Hotel Radium’s best suite and saw, sitting up in bed, a poor pitiful human wreck wearing a blue *crêpe de chine* nightgown trimmed with lace that couldn’t be more expensive than it was.

Immediately she became oppressed by a curious sensation of impotence, for there was something in Olga Heamick’s aspect which made her feel that she was in the presence of an unmatchable strength—that wild relentless strength which the god of Green Grapes places as a dangerous weapon in the hands of his victims.

“ Ah ! Elsa, you are a good sport to come ! You know I always like to have jolly people round me, and you are jolly, aren’t you ? ” This was the greeting, spoken

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thickly and heavily, but not unsteadily or weakly. Tonight the drunkard had drunk enough to be perilously sure of herself. "Come over here," she continued in the tone of command which comes naturally to people of the governing classes, or to those who are conscious of the financial power to buy up a large proportion of their fellow-creatures.

The insolence of either pedigree or wealth is very insolent.

Elsa went over to the bed, and immediately her right wrist was seized by Olga's left hand, while with the other she whipped out a pistol and levelled it at Elsa's forehead.

"Now, my dear, the moment you call out or attempt to get away, I fire. When I have finished what I have got to finish I shall kill you and then kill myself, but before that there are certain things I want you to do for me. You will be jolly and sensible about it, won't you?"

"Of course I will," replied Elsa, with amazing calmness, for now she understood fully what she was up against, and was prepared to act as carefully and resourcefully as though she herself had never been dulled or stultified by the fermented juice of green grapes.

"I'm glad of that, because it's always silly to make a fuss about what can't be helped—and my killing you will be one of those things which can't be helped."

"I quite expect that it can't." (God! how awful to feel this cold steel burning and searing her brow! God! how *awful* to die like this!) "But though, Olga, I expect it's quite right to do what you are doing to do, I can't see exactly why I am to be killed."

"Can't you, my dear?—I'll explain. It's a great compliment that I am going to kill you. I've had this thing ready for some time, but I couldn't find anyone who was worth the sending of my soul to eternal damnation. But I think you are worth it: you are a pal, and it's always worth while going to hell to serve a pal."

"That's quite right—a fine idea—but before you waste your soul like this, you are sure I shall really benefit by being killed?"

"Benefit? What a fool you are, my dear! As though it isn't the biggest benefit to get any poor devil out of this

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damnable world ! And I'm doing this for you, Elsa, because I like you. I don't want to go and leave you here—it would be a mean trick, because, as perhaps you don't know, there are going to be terrible doings in this old world later on. (Don't move an inch, my dear, or I shall finish you off right away and I don't want to do that. There are certain things that must be got through first.) Have you got anything you want to settle up before you go ? ”

“ God be thanked ! This might be a loophole for escape ! ”

“ Yes, Olga, I have. There are various things at home which must be put in order, so if you could let me go to Burlford Grange, do what I want to do, and then come back here—”

“ Don't be a fool, my dear, and don't behave as though you thought I was one, too ! When I am going to kill you, is it likely I shall let you skip off to escape being killed ! (Don't wriggle, Elsa ! The bit of cold stuff is getting nice and warm on your forehead now, isn't it ?) I wish I could get hold of my beauty and the lady as well ! I wouldn't send them into the comfortable world where you and I are going—not I !—but I'd just blow off a few of their limbs to keep them from gallivanting round the world, and smash up chunks off their faces so that they should leave off thinking each other pretty and wanting to kiss each other ! Ha ! ha ! I'm IT when I get busy, aren't I, my dear ? ”

Elsa agreed cheerfully, while inside her body and mind the most agonizing upheavals were taking place.

It must be that she was dying with terror. One moment her chest, stomach, heart and throat seemed numb and useless, and the next second they were all beating and palpitating till she experienced the sensation of being one large pulse, which must soon break under the strain of its own pressure.

Her brain, too—first cruelly clear, then dull and dazed—vivid and empty, then full of the most hideous hellish thoughts that oncoming madness could devise.

It must be that she was going mad—that a pitiful, craven fear of death was sending her mad. And what a coward and craven ! Any condemned criminal would be

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more plucky, and as for those lofty aristocrats—made almost too lofty in modern melodrama laid in the time of the French Revolution!—as for them, they—they—

“Ha! ha! ha!”

Elsa found herself laughing before she knew that she was capable of making such an ill-timed sound. But the dipsomaniac was pleased; she was always pleased when people were “jolly” or anyhow made a pretence of being so.

“Yes, it’s a bit of a joke, isn’t it, my dear?” she cried, herself vibrating with amusement, so that the pistol wobbled on Elsa’s forehead—wobbled to such an extent that any second it might go off and finish the business before it was due to be finished.

“It’s a very good idea, Olga, very good——” (it was amazing how she managed to speak calmly like this—probably it was the calmness of insanity!) “—and I’m glad you’ve thought of it. But before we go, can I have a brandy-and-soda, or something to freshen me up for the journey?”

This ruse might be a success—she might be allowed to go into the next room—but not likely.

“Of course, my dear! We shall both want bucking up. Here it is!” And, still holding the pistol against Elsa’s head, she leant down by the side of the bed and produced a glass and a bottle half-full of brandy.

“Everything ready for use and convenience, you see! (Keep still, my dear. If you wobble so much I shall be bound to let go too soon!) Now, have a drink and—no, don’t have one till you’ve done what I want you to do about my will! I want to destroy one I’ve got in a trunk in the bathroom so we’ll get that first. Come along!”

Her agility was extraordinary and the steady definiteness of her movements suggested nothing but a condition of sober determination.

“Won’t you put on a dressing gown?” murmured Elsa as Olga leapt out of bed and, still keeping the pistol in its murderous position, proceeded to marshal her (Elsa) out of the room.

“Why should I, my dear? If *crépe de chine* is trans-

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parent, why bother when in half an hour we shall be in a place where people never wear anything except their birthday suits? And if I do feel a bit too breezy, why worry when there's a nice warm time coming later on? Eh! Now, forward—quick march!"

It was a most absurd situation and just for a second Elsa's sense of humour broke through her sense of terror.

She, clothed in a smartly cut grey cloth costume, effectively shod and gloved, being led by a semi-nude woman who was laughing pleasantly and holding a pistol to her head! Most pathetically grim and grotesque!

"Now, my dear, remember if you call out or attempt to get hold of Bateman or anything of the sort '*pop*' goes the little toy without one second's delay! So no little games of that sort, if you please. Go ahead! Ha! ha! Right about turn—quick march—*halt!!*"

By this time they had reached the bathroom and Elsa found herself forced to kneel down in front of a flat iron-bound trunk while with one hand Olga continued holding the pistol and with the other handed her victim a bunch of keys.

"Unlock it, my dear . . ." (Elsa obeyed) ". . . get out that large cash box at the bottom—put it under your arm—shut the box and lock it—get up—come along—quick march back again, and then in a very few minutes now we shall be out of the way of everything that bothers us."

And then it was that desperate terror fired Elsa to take a desperate risk. In a very few minutes she would have left behind her life and all that life means, therefore why not either hurry things on or take just a chance of putting them right?

It was worth it—just a sporting chance and worth trying!

They were turning away from the box, passing between the bath and a table fixed next to the porcelain lavatory basin, a table on which stood various bottles and jars of creams and pomades, brushes and combs and a large carafe full of drinking water.

And now was the moment: another second and opportunity would be lost.

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So, instead of losing her opportunity, Elsa took it by seizing the carafe of water and hurling it over her shoulder into Olga's face.

It might have missed aim, it might have gone sideways and had the result of merely enraging the temporary lunatic without interfering with her murderous and suicidal plans—yes, it might, but it didn't.

The particular angel who watched over the destiny of Elsa Johnson-Carr decided to give her a little more time on earth in which to cultivate common sense and make an effort at curing egoism and, perhaps, so find a certain amount of mental rest in being happy!

The water splashed full in Olga Heamick's face, and while being hurled to the further corner of the room the pistol went off and lodged a bullet in the wall.

Then came shouting, screams, the inconsequent frenzy of a drunken madwoman, a hideous and desperate struggle between the one who wanted to murder and the one who didn't want to *be* murdered—the entrance of Bateman—the entrance of lift porter and of a couple of visitors who had heard the screams and shouting—and finally the subjection and manacling of a foaming, fighting, biting woman and the arrival of a doctor to treat one of the worst cases of *delirium tremens* that had ever come his way.

And that was the end of Olga Heamick's freedom. For the rest of her life she would live in that ease and luxury which makes wealth the blessed thing it is, but always watched, never free, never able to make use of Humanity's greatest asset—will-power—and never able to seek the one solace which had helped to make her forget that the man she loved and who belonged to her was passing glad days and nights in the arms of another woman.

Bacchus might whisper and beckon, Bacchus might call and dangle a great luscious bunch of green grapes, Bacchus might promise contentment, philosophical acceptance of existing conditions and a joyous outlook on existence—but Olga could only stretch out her hands without being able to take one solace which he might offer.

For the rest of her life Sir Jocelyn Heamick's lawful wife would be "under restraint."

Green Grapes

When Elsa got back to West Passage she wondered in a half-crazy sort of way if the insanity caused by *delirium tremens* was catching. She felt that she was going quite and legitimately mad—quite mad enough to hold pistols to unoffending people's heads or to do anything else which the vagaries of insanity might dictate.

She would never, never forget the horrors which she had just passed through, and though they were horrors resulting from the effect of drink, she knew for an ugly certainty that nothing, *nothing* but drink could ever help to banish them from her own fevered, jumping, dancing, swaying mind. (Just like a cinematograph performance, was this mind of hers—shifting, quivering, waving, never still or steady !)

“ Be quiet, Bacchus ! ” She actually spoke aloud and laughed as she did it. “ Surely Olga Heamick is enough for one day's work ! Can't you leave off making suggestions ? Don't dangle that bunch of green grapes and tell me that the juice of them fermented is the panacea for all ills ! Be quiet, Bacchus, be quiet, you impish, devilish thing ! No, no, you are rather a dear ! You have merry eyes which show a sense of humour—and that is the best and main human asset ! You are laughing, aren't you, Boy Bacchus ?—laughing, perhaps, because you think I'm afraid of you ! So I *am* afraid of you—afraid you'll do the same with me as you've done with poor Olga ! But you won't, will you ? No, of course you won't ! There are degrees in everything, aren't there ? Olga is like a lover who has tired you out by too much ardour, and to get rid of her you had to be drastic and brutal. I understand why it was, I understand. But so far—yes, so far—I don't overdo it, do I ? I may one day, Bacchus, but I don't yet because—because—oh my God ! I believe I really hate you just as I have hated you all my innocent unsatisfactory life ! I *do* believe I want to get away from you, yet I can't—I *can't* ! I chased you deliberately, ran after you, sought you against my own inclinations, and now I am punished by not being able to do without you ! You've got me, Boy Bacchus—yet you haven't got me ! I *feel* you haven't really got me, and that it

Green Grapes

only needs a will more powerful than your own to tear me away, but that will isn't here—*mine* isn't strong enough—I want someone else's, and there is no one, no one anywhere! . . . Yes, yes, I'm coming—I hear what you tell me—that I shall forget what I have seen if I only let you make me forget! I must let you—I can't help it!"

The words were ended; the fury that was in her had burnt itself out, and now there was only a desire for balmy contentment and peace.

"*La Consolation*"—she looked at the pictured bunch of green grapes in the corner, then moved slowly and heavily towards the oak sideboard in the recess.

On the shelf behind the closed doors was—*la consolation*!

CHAPTER XXVII

TO DO WITH MARRIAGE

THE next day Elsa returned to Burlford Grange: two days later she came back again to West Passage.

She had gone to Stoking Common to get away from the Gray's Inn self, then she had gone back to Gray's Inn to get away from the Stoking Common self.

Also she had come back to see Edward Arkenson.

In point of fact she had returned to Burlford Grange to prevent herself being able to see Edward Arkenson, then she had gone back to West Passage so that she *should* see Edward Arkenson!

Her state of mind was a pitifully chaotic one.

And now as she sat in one of Ralph Oldham's deep-seated cretonne-covered chairs, there came into her mind a tangle of hopeless thoughts.

She had come back for the sake of keeping in touch with Love, yet—yet—well, what was she to do with love now she had got it?

What was she to do with anything?—with her own life? She couldn't do anything with anything seeing that she

Green Grapes

was no longer a creature of volition. She was kept and captured and forced to act according to the dictates of a relentless taskmaster—Boy Bacchus!

Such a smiling, merry, insouciant god he had seemed at first, but, like many others whose general aspect suggests happy-go-lucky gaiety and freedom from all care, he was proving himself to be a despotic ruler, demanding implicit obedience from his subjects.

Elsa wouldn't be able to get away from him: unaided she would never be able to get away, so there was nothing to do except try to keep the ugly secret for as long as it could be kept, and to adjust matters accordingly.

And in the meantime she would try to be jolly. Poor Olga Heamick always set such store by jollity, so if that was the drunkard's speciality it behoved her (Elsa) to cultivate the quality as insistently as possible.

She would do so.

But before thinking how and when the jollity should begin to assert itself there sounded a knock at the door.

Instinctively Elsa knew who it was, and when she went out into the passage it was with the glowing face of a woman going to meet her best beloved.

"I've only just come back!" she announced when the door had been opened and shut and she and Edward were beginning their embrace of greeting. (She hoped the kisses wouldn't be too long or too strong, for though she hadn't drunk anything that day there was always the haunting idea that she might have begun to acquire the drunkard's heavy-sweet breath.)

"I know that because I came yesterday and found you were not here. But now that you are here, yesterday doesn't matter, my sweetest dear! Kiss me!"

The command was so resolute that the bare thought of disobeying it seemed out of the question. So Elsa, forgetting that wine odours might exhale and cling, lifted her lips, and the lovers' moment began.

A long moment, a perfect moment, a seemingly endless moment—then at last, sobered and serious with the strength of a passion that was growing to be tremendous, they went from the gloom of the passage into the sitting-room.

Green Grapes

“When can we be married?” Edward put his question quite suddenly, and as he spoke his face lightened and he looked at her with the merry eyes of a happy boy. It was as though he was glad to have said it, glad to have succumbed to a rush of impulse and done something which he had not definitely intended to do.

“Not at all!” answered Elsa flippantly. The moment of passionate greeting had been strong and serious—this moment must anyhow appear light and inconsequent. For she was a woman with a secret, and women who have secrets must adopt all sorts of ruses to hide them.

“Why ‘not at all’, darling? Come and sit in my arms while you tell me why it’s ‘not at all’.”

She went to him on the sofa.

“Oh! because—er—well, because we don’t know anything about each other. You don’t know what I do when I go away and I—er—well, I don’t know a single thing about your absences and sudden journeys, do I? And it’s been so easy and pleasant—this not wanting to know anything about each other—hasn’t it?”

“Delightful, darling. But when we are married will be time enough to tell each other where we go and what we do, won’t it?”

“Will it? I don’t think so. And why do you want to *marry* me, Edward?”

“For the very conventional reason that I love you?”

“I am intensely glad you love me, but all the same I don’t see that marriage is—is—well, is *necessary*!” (Here she was arguing against what she most desired! Just what would be done by a woman who had made a failure of her life! Yet what else could she do—she, the possessor of an ugly sensual self-indulgent secret which mustn’t be found out!)

“You mayn’t think it necessary, dearest, but I do—and it’s what I think that counts with myself!”

“How selfish of you!”

“Of course. Love—real, all-desiring, all-passionate sex love—must be selfish. I don’t want to have you with me always for the sake of making you happy—it’s for the sake

Green Grapes

of making myself superlatively happy that I want it and intend to have it."

"You put things very charmingly, Edward!"

Then she slipped away from his embrace and leant back against the cushions. He bent over her and they looked at each other with the strong and desperately penetrating stare of two people trying to get into the very centre of each other's souls.

And as Elsa looked and looked the blue dazzled her, while the brilliant eyes appeared to grow bigger and bigger till she seemed to be faced by a splash of summer sky lit with diamond gleams.

"Don't—*don't!*" She almost gasped out the words—for it was as though her secret was being drawn out and wrenched away from her. But the gaze was not withdrawn, and gradually she began to know that those brilliant blue eyes were gloating over the flawless creaminess of her own skin, the scarlet of her mouth and the wavy blackness of her hair.

Edward was feasting his thoughts and sight on those of her physical attractions which made a desperate appeal to his whole nature, and for the moment mind and soul, spirit and sympathy were all forgotten.

And this was the time to make the only suggestion which, in the case of a woman who was weighed down by an ugly secret, seemed feasible—the only suggestion which fair-play and honour could allow her to make.

"There is no need for me to be your wife—we shall be just as dear to each other if I am your mistress!"

It was brave of her to say it, but the effort of doing so was less difficult than might be imagined—anyhow in the case of a woman whose life had always been full of revolt against all shames and pretences.

Edward actually laughed, laughed very kindly, tenderly and affectionately.

"I disagree with you," he answered speaking with his lips almost on her own. (The breath! the drunkard's breath! Was there any fear that he might discover?) "I admit that if you were my mistress because some obstacle or impediment prevented your being my wife, we

Green Grapes

should be as dear to each other. But if it were possible for us to marry and we did not marry, something would go wrong with our love. No, dearest, I'm afraid there's no alternative—you've got to be my wife!"

Elsa didn't answer except to stretch out a warm creamy arm and lay it about his neck.

She was drawing him closer, luring him on to love her in the way in which men love women who can have as many secrets as they like without being unfair or dishonourable—women who don't matter very much!

She had a wild and quite desperate longing to marry him and bind him to her so that to the end he must be hers in the eyes of the law which alone makes it possible for women to keep their possessions—but she was decent and fair enough to push that longing on one side and to try and establish a relation which would make it possible for him to be the lover of another woman any day after to-morrow!

It may have been very immoral, but it was a very fair and decent thing to try and do.

"Don't let's think of plans or alternatives or anything like that to-day," she whispered. "We are just here alone and together—we couldn't be more alone or more together—and we love each other, and we don't know anything about each other. Hold me close, my dear, hold me close and—and let's forget there's any sort of a world going on outside!"

He held her close, desperately and almost painfully close, then he kissed her one last long kiss, put her out of his arms, and got up.

"In three weeks from now I am coming here to ask what day our wedding is to be," he said. "Nothing else will suit me or satisfy me, and three weeks will give you time enough to decide whether I am to be sent by express speed to the devil, because I shan't let myself see you any more, or whether I am to be burdened by the, possibly very uncomfortable, cares of married life. But marriage is the only thing that'll suit, my dear. I—I want to be tied up without any loophole for escape! Three weeks from to-day! God bless you, and be a good girl!"

"*A good girl!*"—she wasn't really a girl at all!

Green Grapes

And God couldn't be expected to bless her now that she was a drunkard ! But the sentence had sounded most extraordinarily sweet and strengthening.

And now he had gone !—but he would return in three weeks !

In three weeks she might make such rapid progress as to be under restraint !—like Olga Heamick !

* * * * *

“ Dear Poet-Philosopher,

“ What shall I do ? What can I do ? ‘ E.’ has asked me to marry him, and I’ve tried to be his mistress instead of his wife—tried hard, because I can’t let him marry Me and My Secret ! A man can have a mistress who is a drunkard without injuring his career or prestige or prospects or anything else, but if he had a wife who might end in dipsomania and *delirium tremens*, there wouldn’t be much of a social or professional or home-life outlook for him, I’m afraid.

“ So, because I am blessed with a certain amount of morality in the way of honour, I tried to make an entirely immoral arrangement.

“ But E. won’t have it. He is coming back in three weeks to fix our wedding day, and by that time— Oh ! God only knows what will happen by that time.

“ Oh ! dear Annock Bee, if only a real modern miracle could take place and I could be cured by then ! If only some angel or good fairy could rise out of the teetotal decency of my harmless past and fight Boy Bacchus for me !—fight him and make an enemy of him—what a wonderful time I could have learning to be happy as the wife of a man I loved and who loved me, and who (very possibly) wouldn’t deceive me !

“ But these ‘ ifs ’ are no good ! I do drink ! I have taught myself and forced myself to drink, and I shall have to go on drinking ! Bacchus won’t be played fast and loose with like this, and—

“ No, I won’t write any more, because this is just a little extra outbreak wedged in before you send me an answer to my last letter. I can’t help writing to you whenever I feel the need of a friend and confidant, and though you aren’t here to say anything wise and soothing I sort of feel your sympathy and know you will express it when next you write.

“ When I find time to wonder about anything except myself I wonder about you and your health. Please tell me more about it, and what poems you have been writing. Because I don’t make long comments on what you write about yourself it doesn’t mean that I am too much absorbed in myself even to think about my dear pen-and-paper friend—it only means that my unconquerable egoism exercises full and relentless control over my pen.

“ *Au revoir*, Annock Bee.

“ From
“ ELSA JOHNSON.”

Green Grapes

When she had finished writing, Elsa got out her fiddle and played—played a wild Bacchanal such as a Wine God would love!

CHAPTER XXVIII

TO DO WITH A DINNER

THE telephone bell rang, and Elsa answered it.

“Is that the Third Floor?”

“It is. Is that the Fourth Floor?”

“It is. The Fourth Floor has never before committed such an unpardonable act of extravagance as to spend a penny on telephoning down to the Third Floor, but as the Fourth Floor is at the moment unshaved and desires to communicate with the Third Floor without a second’s delay, and before there is any chance of the Third Floor doing her customary flitting act, the Fourth Floor is willing to face the present outlay of expenditure. And what the Fourth Floor wants to say is—will the Third Floor come up this evening at half-past seven to a casserole meal cooked by the Fourth Floor himself, and to be eaten in company with a somewhat interesting and brainy individual named Elwyn Brent, who the Fourth Floor feels incapable of entertaining without the help of the feminine element. Will the Third Floor be kind and come?”

“The Third Floor will be kind—to *herself*—and will come with pleasure!”

“The Fourth Floor thanks the Third Floor, and will now proceed to shave. *Au revoir*, Third Floor!”

“*Au revoir*, Fourth Floor.”

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With most unimpressive punctuality Elsa presented herself at Tim Haven’s abode, for the door to be opened by the host himself wearing a *chef’s* white cap and apron.

“You make me feel hungry to look at you!” cried Elsa merrily.

Green Grapes

Tim Haven and the atmosphere surrounding him was always a temporary cure for morbidity.

"That is my reason for dressing up, because even if the food is practically uneatable, nobody realises that such could be the case when cooked by an individual wearing a *chef's* cap and a *chef's* apron. Will madame enter?"

"Madame" did enter and went straight into the sitting-room, where she found the table laid for the meal, also the guest who was to share it with her.

"Dr. Elwyn Brent—Mrs. Elsa Johnson," said Tim ceremoniously. Then he added in a soothing whisper; "You must now entertain each other while the food is being brought in. Don't watch me bring it in—don't see me—ignore me entirely until I tell you to leave off ignoring me!"

"He's a dear!" was the first observation Elsa made as the neat white-capped and white-aproned figure left the room.

"That's the highest term of praise which a woman can apply to a man with whom she is not in love, isn't it?" replied Dr. Brent.

And directly he spoke Elsa was conscious of the extraordinary strength and fulness of his quiet voice—the sort of voice which would suggest the idea of being able to compel the dead to return to life simply by means of calling them.

And having been tremendously impressed by his voice, she then took careful stock of his whole person, and saw a pleasant, round, boyish, clean-shaven face, smooth features, a genial ingenuous mouth and comfortable chin, a well-built figure more inclined to stoutness than thinness, and white, plump hands.

His eyes—not large or impressive—were grey, and on looking into them one discovered depthless depths of steady assurance. It was as though those calm, large-pupilled eyes were gazing on the world and telling its troubled dwellers that all would be well in the end.

Elwyn Brent's eyes seemed to hold a message of hope for anyone who cared to read it.

"Are you doctor of Law, Medicine, or Divinity?" asked Elsa in the friendly way which all men liked.

Green Grapes

"Which do you think?"

"You look too kind to 'divine,' and too pleasant to be legal. I think it's medicine."

"You think rightly."

"And I don't believe you have anything to do with measles or colds in the head or common complaints like that."

"You are very discerning, Mrs. Johnson."

"No, I don't think it requires much discernment to feel sure that you are a specialist, that you are to be found in a big West End house with enormously thick carpets and where there is a waiting-room large as a small chapel, containing a sideboard roomier than a small cottage."

"You are quite right, but the humiliating part is that the whole of the house doesn't belong to me! I rent one suite and I share the chapel-like waiting room with two other doctors."

"Oh! I don't think that matters as the house is so *very* big and the waiting-room is *very* enormous! And do please tell me what you specialise in."

"Don't make me do that! It won't sound a bit impressive if I tell you myself. You would only—"

"*Madame est servie!*"

The interruption came unexpectedly and when Elsa and Dr. Brent looked round it was to see that the white capped *chef* had transformed himself into a *littérateur* in a well-cut dinner jacket, and that the larger dinner waggon in the corner was laden with dark green jars and pots and dishes of every size and description, while on a small table at the side stood piles of fruits, a miraculous cream-and-pink sweet and an array of bottles of various colours and shapes.

"What a fine arrangement!" said Dr. Brent indicating the gas-heated copper sheet which kept hot the dishes that were intended to be hot.

"Yes, when I first came here I tried to organize profusely, so that whatever emergency might arise I should be able to cope with it without calling in outside assistance. After we have eaten you shall see my patent fountain which washes up by itself, and the revolving drier, and the self-working knife cleaner (put your knives in, wind it up and let it go on

Green Grapes

until the knives are cleaned) and the egg fryer and all the other devices of a lone and non-affluent bachelor. Madame —*hors d'œuvres* of a somewhat unusual nature?"

And not only the *hors d'œuvres* were unusual but also the crushed-strawberry-tinted soup—the uncanny little casserole eggs, mushrooms and livers—the cutlets dressed in green jackets—the bird (what was it?) served with strangely delicious accessories which looked like periwinkles—the amazing cream-and-pink sweet—and the melting moment in cheese.

The coffee was positively superlative.

"I've never yet eaten a meal which has left me feeling so supremely contented and pleased with myself and everybody else!" said Elsa, when at the conclusion of the last course they adjourned to the low deep seats by the window.

Dr. Brent added his tribute, then conversation drifted on with the easy smoothness only possible when all talkers are in complete accord.

"Oh! Tim, do tell me what Dr. Brent won't tell me!" cried Elsa suddenly when there was a moment of silence.

"Anything about his past? I hope not because—"

"Oh! no, nothing so futile. (Pasts are always so futile, aren't they?) No, what I want to know is to do with his present. What is he a specialist in?"

"May I say, doctor?"

"Anything—everything! Free advertisement is always welcome!"

"What is it then?"

"Dr. Brent specialises in curing nearly everything which his patients sincerely wish him to cure."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean hypnotic suggestion—that's it, isn't it, Brent?"

"Yes, Haven, that's it."

"Dr. Brent cures everything which is in any way connected with the nerves or minds of men and women. If you were a thief and sincerely wished to leave off being a thief, Dr. Brent would see that you *did* leave off. He would *make* you leave off and you would never again feel impelled to tear the half-guinea pin out of my tie!"

"How would you do it?" Elsa ignored the joke, put her

Green Grapes

brief question breathlessly and with a certain note of unconscious appeal in her voice.

The doctor laughed boyishly and in the least scientific way imaginable.

"I should just make you realise that you didn't *want* to steal and directly you realised that you wouldn't do it any more," he answered quietly.

"Sort of Christian Science idea?"

"Not in the least."

"Then is it—"

"It is—to put it simply and without all the imposing words which I could use if I liked!—it is pouring a stream of certain moral intentions and desires into a chasm caused by a split in the brain which is created by means of hypnotism. Through that chasm there soaks in the suggestion made by the hypnotist until the patient absorbs so much of beliefs and intentions which it is desirable for him to absorb that actually he is no longer *able* to suffer—either morally or physically—as he has been suffering. He cannot do it: it is out of his power. Suggestion means (to quote Sidis) '*the intrusion into the mind of an idea; met with more or less opposition by the person; accepted uncritically at last; and realized unreflectively, almost automatically.*' No explanation could be more lucid or comprehensive than that very brief one."

"What *sort* of cases do you treat as a rule?" This inquiry came from Tim Haven. Elsa had suddenly become silent and very thoughtful.

"Everything connected with the nervous system, either directly or indirectly. Of course, neuritis, neuralgia, hysteria, locomotor ataxy, drunkenness, irritability, epilepsy, catalepsy—"

"Did you say *drunkenness*?" It was only afterwards that Elsa wondered if she had shouted the question. It seemed to her that she remembered doing so.

But Dr. Brent answered quite mildly and without any surprise.

"Oh! yes; those cases yield more quickly than most others—particularly when the patient is sincere in his or her wish to be cured. Laryngitis, too, is—"

Green Grapes

But Elsa didn't want to hear anything about laryngitis. Her egoism was assertive as usual, and she wanted only to hear about her own disease.

And her disease was DRINK!!!

* * * *

Never had Elsa talked less than she talked during the rest of that evening, for all the time she wanted to do nothing except watch the man who could make a cleft in human brains and pour into that cleft the healing fluid of moral and healthy suggestion.

In the shadow of the window seat she sat and watched him, finding in his ingenuous boyish face a desperate strength of purpose, which quite possibly wasn't evidenced there at all.

And his full, unstrained voice fell like a command upon her ears, just as the steady gaze of his large-pupilled grey eyes seemed to be looking right into the centre of her soul to find its sins and follies and diseases.

Was it possible that this pleasant, rather stout, soft-handed, normally-dressed man could score over the sinuous, winking, brown-skinned god?

Could Elwyn Brent undo all that Boy Bacchus had done? Could he crush the juice out of green grapes until—anyhow for Elsa—nothing remained but sour and tasteless skins? Was it in his power to make detestable the odour of wine as it had been detestable all her (Elsa's) life? Could he make a cleft in her brain and through that cleft force in the suggestion that drink was abhorrent and vile, and that wine or spirits would produce nausea and vomiting?

Powers in heaven! What a mercy if he could do this! Yet—yet—oh! what a blessed relief it would be to get down to the third floor where on a shelf behind a sideboard door was the "consolation"!!

She had drunk nothing but Chablis at dinner—and very little of it—but now there was that hot devil in her throat, scraping and tearing and making his demands—the devil who worked so conscientiously in the service of Boy Bacchus!

If only this pleasant-faced doctor could tell the devil

Green Grapes

to go away, or assure her that the devil wasn't there at all, Boy Bacchus might be thwarted !

It was a wonderful idea, an idea full of golden glorious hope for the future ! But for the present—Oh ! God, that devil was at her throat !

Elsa got up.

" I must go ! " she cried, with a seemingly unnecessary note of most desperate determination in her voice.

" Is it really necessary ? " asked the host.

" Yes, Tim, it's really necessary. I've had a particularly happy evening, and a lovely feed, but I—I must go now. Good night—I dare say we shall have an encounter on the stairs to-morrow ! Good night, Dr. Brent ! "

And it so happened that as she turned to take leave of her fellow-guest the host—remembering, possibly, that a kettle had been left boiling, or a tap had been left turned on—hurriedly left the room.

" Good night, Mrs. Johnson. I should be so glad if you would come to see me. I could help you. Forgive me for saying it, but I know you want help. And I think it is in my power to help you. Remember, it is part of my trade to know things without being told them, and, quite needless to say, I am not cadging for a patient. It is in the interests of scientific experiment that I should be grateful if you would call upon me. Any morning between 11 and 1. Good night ! "

She scarcely had time to answer before Tim reappeared to conduct her down the stairs and leave her at her own door.

Then she went in and wondered if she was furious with Elwyn Brent for being impertinent, or grateful to him for being almost uncannily penetrating.

Yet, after all, it wasn't so astonishingly penetrating, because in all probability she was beginning to carry evidences of her secret on her face. On looking in the glass there were no visible signs that such was the case, but a doctor accustomed to dealing with dipsomaniacs, neurotics, hysterics and other human derelicts, would be able to tell.

And he wanted to help her—to *help* her—

Green Grapes

It would be wonderful to be helped—to be helped so successfully that when Edward Arkenson came back in three weeks it might be possible to say what he wanted to say.

But now—at this moment, at this horrible moment, there was Boy Bacchus standing in the corner, winking and dangling his bunch of green grapes!

“ You’re not going to get away, my dear ! ” (It was almost as though Elsa could hear him saying it.) “ And you won’t try to get away, you won’t try to give up the only consolation you have ever known ! Haven’t I helped you not to see so clearly the inner motives responsible for every human action ? Hasn’t your mind been more tranquil since my soothing influence came to bear upon it ? Haven’t I made you more tolerant of the world and the people in it ? You know that I have, and you know now that you couldn’t do without me ! I give gaiety, tranquillity, wit, philosophy and all that a woman wants to make life livable. I am your friend. Once you thought of me as your lover, but when a real mortal lover came along the god was made into a friend. And so long as you never desert me I am your friend and will serve you faithfully until the end. And to-night you need me—I am kissing and touching your throat to make you need me ! Come !—I have the balm and consolation ready !—come ! ”

And the grape god’s victim went !

CHAPTER XXIX TO DO WITH SUGGESTION

A ROOM—the floor covered with a Turkey carpet many inches thick—ponderous velvet curtains looped back with ponderous cords—a few huge chairs—a couple of solid tables—several gigantic bookshelves filled with mammoth books—in one corner a screen, and behind the screen a low deep-cushioned couch—an immense desk—and seated at the immense desk a round-faced man eating cherries.

Green Grapes

The man was Dr. Elwyn Brent, who always ate as much fruit as possible in the intervals between seeing patients.

And on this particular morning it looked as though he might be able to get through a whole basket of cherries without interruption, for Lady Breet (stuttering and hiccoughs) had just left and there was a full hour before Miss McCander (facial twitchings and sleeplessness) was due to arrive. It was unusual for Dr. Brent to have an hour of consulting time unfilled, but as Mrs. Callaway (depression and irritability) and the Comtesse Lérégard (nervous catarrh) had both 'phoned to put off their appointments, the fashionable hypnotist had sixty minutes to spare.

Many people called Elwyn Brent a "quack" but those who had been treated by him called him a blessing to mankind.

For at least ten minutes Dr. Brent went on with his cherries, then there came a knock at the door followed by the entrance of a footman.

"A lady wants to know if she can see you, sir," he said. "She hasn't made an appointment and told me to remind you that she met you at Mr. Haven's dinner. 'Mrs. Johnson'—she says is her name."

So it had all come about as seemed most likely, and will-power had not been expended in vain! The black-haired woman with the creamy skin and scarlet mouth had responded to a silent and insistent call.

Dr. Brent projected the last cherry stone into his curved fingers, then, after having got rid of stalks and other evidences of fruitarian guilt, gave instructions that the lady was to be shewn up.

And in less than two minutes those instructions were obeyed. "Mrs. Johnson" came into the room.

"I am so glad you've been able to come," he said, taking her hand in a warm and comforting clasp.

"It isn't a case of ability, it—it's—well, I suppose it's a matter of resolution!" replied Elsa a little bitterly.

Dr. Brent smiled a pleasant smile that didn't mean anything at all—just a mild, meaningless smile.

"Sit down," he said rather stupidly. His manner this morning was slightly suggestive of pleasant stupidity.

Green Grapes

Elsa sat down.

“How long has this been going on?”

That was his first question and strangely enough Elsa never thought to ask what he meant, or how he knew or what he knew. She simply took it that the doctor understood the case and that she must allow him to deal with it in his own way.

“Only a little while—a few months.”

“How did it begin?”

“I *forced* myself to begin. I was rabidly teetotal—even the smell of anything alcoholic revolted me—until I suddenly made up my mind to see if the everlasting restlessness and dissatisfaction and suspicion and clear-seeing that disturbed my mental peace could be soothed by drinking wine. A woman drunkard of my acquaintance told me that it could. I then tried to get over my repulsion towards wine and spirits, and only succeeded when one day I went to the wine cellars of Carmena and Hoyce (my uncle is one of the partners) and inhaled the fumes inside an empty wine vat. From that moment I seemed to comprehend the restful lure of it all and I—I have been drinking ever since!”

“I take it that the desire is increasing?”

“Yes, every day.”

“Anything of the sort in your family?”

“Nothing. I originated the vice!”

“Is the desire always with you or do you have bouts?”

“It is now becoming that the desire is always there more or less. I have made very rapid progress, haven’t I?”

There was a touch of bitter flippancy with the last question, but Dr. Brent took no notice of it. He appeared to be gently, but seriously, interested in quite a comparatively normal sort of business.

“Yes, but that is only because you have *insisted* upon doing so. You have suggested to yourself that it would be helpful and desirable to take too much wine or spirits, consequently you have gone headlong at it. When you thoroughly realise that you have made a mistake, and that it is neither helpful nor desirable, you will go back just as quickly to your former sane and healthy habits. The

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whole business in your case is only forced, almost a matter of affectation, if you will excuse my saying so!" And he laughed just a little chaffingly and in such a way as to suggest that he was dealing with a rather silly, but quite likeable, child.

"Certainly I'll excuse you, and though once upon a time I shouldn't have liked that way of putting it, it rather pleases me now. I wonder, though, if you will be able to treat me in your own particular way. I'm horribly obstinate, you know."

"Yes, obstinate in a pleasant sort of a way, but not in a futile and silly way. You wouldn't give me permission to try and cure you, and then try to stop my doing it, would you?"

"Of course, I wouldn't!" In the beginning she *had* vaguely thought of impeding the hypnotist's treatment, but now she realised what a particularly feeble and petty proceeding it would be.

"Stand up, will you? I want to get an idea as to whether you will respond easily, or not."

Elsa stood up.

"Take off your hat."

She took it off, and as she did so he also rose and stood beside her.

"You are falling backwards, you know——" (his arm was held stretched out behind her, but she didn't realise it) "—yes, you are standing on the edge of a precipice, and nothing can keep you from falling backwards! You *are* falling backwards—you *are*——" (So strangely soothing these simple words spoken in a dull and monotonous voice, only slightly accentuated here and there!) "You can't help yourself—" (now the words seemed to be coming in a breathless cascade, quicker, quicker, not leaving a second for any other suggestion to interfere with the one now being implanted in the brain) "—yes, you can't help yourself—you can't—you can't—you can't—*you are falling—falling—falling—*"

And the next thing which Elsa realised was that Dr. Brent was raising her from the recumbent position which she had assumed when falling backwards against his arm.

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" Did I get as far as the floor ? " she enquired vaguely.

"Yes, almost. And now hold out your arm—hold it out—it's getting stiff, isn't it?—in a minute you won't be able to bend it at all—you can hardly bend it now—now you *can't* bend it—now, try as you will, you *can't* bend your arm—you *can't*—you simply *can't* bend your arm—it is stiff and rigid—you *can't bend it*—"

And she couldn't. She did try—or she thought she tried—but now the usually soft and yielding arm was like a bar of iron. . . .

"All right! *Pht!* You can move it now!"

And immediately the rigidity disappeared, and with a soft thud Elsa's hand fell back against her thigh.

"Yes, you will be a very satisfactory patient—very ready to receive the right impressions. Come over here, will you?"

Elsa went to the further corner where stood the couch shut off by the screen.

Dr. Brent pulled back one flap of the screen.

“Lie down, will you? Make yourself quite comfortable.”

"Lie down, will you? Make yourself quite comfortable." Elsa lay down without either surprise or remonstrance. Positively it seemed pleasant and restful, this doing exactly what she was ordered to do.

"Look at my two fingers." She looked at them: it was rather absurd of him to hold them in a position suggesting the "merry-thought" bone of a chicken, but she couldn't help looking. "You are not going to drink any more wine or spirits—you will feel sick if you even taste a drop—probably you will actually *be* sick—" (how large those fingers were getting!—opening, then closing—closing, then opening!) "—no matter how hard you try to swallow stimulants you won't be able to do it—I tell you that *you won't be able to do it*—you won't—" (in a haze the fingers vanishing—now deepened gloom as the screen is closed round the couch—now the full monotonous voice coming from farther and farther away—from the farthest end of the room) "—if you put a glass of wine or spirits to your lips the nausea will be so intense that you couldn't possibly swallow the contents—you *can't* do it—it is that you *won't be able*—" (softer—like the droning of summer

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insects—droning—gloom—droning—darkness—) “—you—
won’t—be—able—to—do—it— You—won’t—be—ab—”

* * * * *

“ *Ph!* ”

That unspellable sound—a snap of the fingers—and Elsa looked up to find Dr. Brent standing by the flap of the screen and looking down at her.

He was smiling his usual pleasant school-boyish smile and, except that his face was slightly flushed, there was no sign that he had been through any exertion, either mental or physical.

“ And now I must be very rude and hustle you away,” he said, as, almost automatically, Elsa got up from the couch and came from behind the screen. “ I’ve got to see four people in the next hour and then I’ve promised to take my wife and two of the kiddies for a run round the Park. Twice a week I’m expected to do that or else there’s trouble ! So come again on Thursday, will you ? (To-day is Tuesday, isn’t it ? Yes, Tuesday.) Come on Thursday at eleven. Have you got your hat pin ? That’s right. Good-bye till Thursday. I think you’ll find yourself feeling very fit and well—good-bye ! ”

It was over. Her hat was on, her gloves were nearly on, she was out of the door, down the stairs, out of the house and in the sunshine . . .

A strange experience ! Of course it was an experience that had really taken place ? Obviously it was, because here she was where she wouldn’t have been if it hadn’t taken place !—but, except for an odd feeling of buoyancy and lightness, it was as though nothing had happened.

But that feeling of buoyancy and lightness was extraordinarily marked. Elsa felt as though she wanted to run or, better still, to fly ! A wandering taxi crawled close by to where she was standing, a taxi which in ordinary circumstances would have been hailed to take her either back to West Passage or to wherever she intended lunching. But to-day she didn’t want any taxi—she wanted to walk because her limbs seemed so full of vigorous life that something must be done to keep them going.

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It wasn't the old restless feeling of wanting to "keep going" because her mind was too full of introspective thoughts—it was just that a feeling of physical fitness did away with any desire for bodily inertia.

So through the streets of London and in the sunshine Elsa set out to walk.

A whim, a sudden inexplicable desire for legitimate surroundings had done it, and four hours later the mistress of Burlford Grange had come home again.

"Oh! Mrs. Hyphon, I am glad to see you!" cried Clare Carter as she came into the gay and indecorously furnished boudoir to find Elsa seated amongst the yellow cushions embroidered with every sort of bird done with every coloured silk.

"I'm so glad you're glad, Clare," answered Elsa in the "pally", half-affectionate tones which her companion hadn't heard for some time.

"Yes, I *am* because—oh!—"

"Now, don't say you're going to give me notice, Clare!"

"Well, I—I—oh! don't put it like that, Mrs. Hyphon, but I have been thinking that the responsibility of being here alone is getting too much for me."

"My dear, there's no responsibility, and you're much too clever for anything to be too much for you! So don't desert me on false pretences. But I daresay I—I—well, perhaps I may not flit so much now—I'll try not to—we'll see! Tell me the news."

The afternoon passed, then when Elsa went upstairs to change her frock for dinner she was conscious of half a dozen ill-defined sensations. She still felt buoyant and fresh, but added to this was an excited apprehensiveness—something akin to the nervousness of an artiste about to make her first really important public appearance.

What would happen? Probably nothing—it was most likely that nothing would be different from what it had been for the past many weeks—there was no real reason for excitement or anticipation—quite absurd to feel any, of course!

And that evening Elsa put on an atrociously gaudy orange satin kimono which Uncle Carmena had brought home as a

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sort of joke. One of her black or neutral tinted gowns would have been more suitable for a quiet home meal, but she had the fancy to look as gay as she felt.

It was really most extraordinary how gay she did feel!

So, wearing the orange satin kimono on which scarlet poppies were worked in chenille with gold thread outlining every leaf, Elsa joined Clare in the dining-room where stood the respectfully beaming Barnstable waiting for the soup to be got out of the way before opening the champagne.

The soup was got out of the way—uninteresting soup, lacking flavour, as soups made by respectable British cooks usually do lack flavour!—then Barnstable got busy and the sound of a “pop” gave gaiety to the proceedings.

Slowly the butler—who had never recovered from the gratification which he had first experienced at his mistress’s reformed teetotal habits—filled Elsa’s long-stemmed glass, before going over to Clare.

The champagne foamed and “sizzed” and Elsa looked at it reflectively while Clare began to drink with frank and harmless enjoyment.

“I’m drinking to the hope that you won’t go away again just yet, Mrs. Hyphon!” cried Clare holding up her glass.

Elsa nodded—held up her glass—looked at it—paused—raised it to her lips—

“Clink—clink—swizz—z—z!!!”

The glass had fallen on the table and broken itself against a spoon—the hissing wine was soaking into the table cloth—and a second later Miss Carter and Barnstable witnessed the extraordinary spectacle of Mrs. Johnson-Carr rushing from the table holding a handkerchief to her lips.

And from somewhere in space *did* there come the sound of a groan?—the groan of a foiled god who, at the moment, was too angry even to wink!!!

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CHAPTER XXX

TO DO WITH "CHAMPAGNE CHARLIE"

ON Thursday Elsa had gone for treatment—again on Saturday—again on three days during the following week—and then no more.

There was no need to go any more because just as Elsa had been seized by nausea on the evening following her first visit to Dr. Elwyn Brent, so she was on every occasion when making the slightest endeavour to consume alcoholic drinks of any description.

Hypnotic suggestion had done its work: it had made a cleft in the brain of Elsa Johnson-Carr, a cleft into which had been poured the steady fervent assurance that, as, all her life, the taste of wines and spirits had been loathsome and nauseating, so they were at the present time.

The little hot-fingered devil no longer scratched at her throat, and green grapes appeared as nothing but a pleasant and refreshing fruit, without any suggestion of fermentation and bottling!

And Elsa herself thought comparatively little about the change which had taken place, because—as is the case with most people who have responded to subconscious influence—she accepted uncritically the idea which had been soaked in through the (figurative) cleft in her brain, and carried it out almost automatically.

Naturally she knew that she had gone to Elwyn Brent to be cured of drink, also that now she *was* cured, and that, being cured, the re-meeting with Edward Arkenson would be a tremendous and momentous occasion—this she knew and realised, but in a moment that was curiously unemotional.

And so it remained unemotional and anti-introspective until a communication from Robert Carmena brought back recollections with sudden vividness.

She remembered "Big Bertie"—the giant vat whose

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almost passionately pungent fumes had been responsible for her definite transition from abstainer to drunkard—and she wondered if what the sense of taste now rejected the sense of smell would accept.

To drink wine produced unspeakable loathing and nausea: to *smell* concentrated wine fumes might have a different effect.

Heavens! supposing that there was a will-power stronger than the will-power of Elwyn Brent! Suppose that Boy Bacchus would be able to regain his lost prey if helped by the co-operation of "Big Bertie"—that while she believed herself to be free from the curse which she had practically insisted upon acquiring, there existed a great bulging brown thing whose breath could exhale odours which would bring her back to the clutches of a skinny-armed god who leered and winked and wore green grapes in his hair!

It might be so—yes, yes, it might be so!

Then a panic seized her, and for the first time placid acceptance of a great deliverance gave place to apprehension that was almost terror.

She believed herself to be free, and it might be that she was not free. It might be that "Big Bertie" still had the whip hand of her and could undo what the insistence of Elwyn Brent had done!

She rushed to the telephone and got on to her uncle's firm.

"Is that Carmena and Hoyce?"

"Yes, madam."

"Put me on to Mr. Carmena's office, please—it is Mrs. Johnson-Carr speaking."

"Yes, madam."

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r.

"Hullo!—ullo!"

"Is that you, Uncle Robert?"

"Who else could it be, fair lady?" (No, no, this wasn't Uncle Robert's voice!)

"I want to speak to Mr. Carmena. Who is that?"

"It is one C.L.—better known to the world of wine and song and laughter as 'Champagne Charlie.'"

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"Oh! Charlie L.! Is it you? I didn't know your voice a bit! It sounded quite Caruso-esque!" And Elsa laughed merrily, because this smart and insouciant friend of her uncle's—one of the Wine World's gayest kings—ranked among her special favourites.

She didn't know him well except that his great firm did business in some way with her uncle's great firm, but when she had seen him she had liked his well-cut clothes and delicate ties and perfect boots and smartly-trimmed moustache and babyish manner of saying brilliant things.

"But, pleased as I am to talk to you, Champagne Charlie, I want a word with Uncle Robert," continued Elsa.

"Why not say the word to me? Bob is out and won't be back for two hours—try to regard me as a thoroughly nice uncle."

"H'm! nobody ever looked less like an uncle than you do! Still, I'll tell you. I only want to know if I were to come along in about half or three-quarters of an hour if I can go over the cellars. I did see them once, but—er—but there is something I've forgotten and want to see again. I wonder if I could come now?"

"I will answer for my good friend Bob, and your good Uncle Robert. I will say that you can come and that I shall take you round myself, and that I shall be waiting for you at the entrance to the cellars. With me you will have a safe and painstaking guide!"

"That's very nice—I shall come at once and I shall look forward to your entertaining me very nicely and telling me everything about everybody smart in town while leading me round the vats and butts and barrels and bins! *Au revoir.*"

"Au revoir une heure!"

And with the roll of Champagne Charlie's perfect French "r's" ringing in her ears, Elsa hung up the receiver and went away to dress.

It was now going to be a fight with Big Bertie—Big Bertie who still might be strong enough to supply vanquished Boy Bacchus with a needed ally!

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True to his word Champagne Charlie was waiting by the entrance to the cellars, and directly Elsa saw him the atmosphere of super-modern smartness which he diffused chased away a certain condition of morbid apprehension which every minute was growing more and more insupportable.

She was afraid—afraid of herself and the huge vat with the bulging sides.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Vickers—my uncle won’t mind my going round the cellars again, will he ? ” she said addressing the grey-bearded foreman, who was already occupied in lighting the candles.

“Certainly not, Mrs. Johnson-Carr. I’m sure Mr. Carmena will be very pleased—he was so delighted last time when you took an interest in the place.”

“And he’ll be more delighted this time, Vickers, because I’m coming round with Mrs. Johnson-Carr if I may, and I do pride myself that if I can’t make an abstainer (that’s what you are, isn’t it, *chère madame* ?) interested in wine no man in London can ! ”

“You’d make anybody interested in anything you wanted, I think ! ” And having paid this very sincere tribute to his employer’s much valued friend, Vickers handed them their candlesticks and the procession formed and passed into the cool sweetness of the cellars.

But this time Elsa wasn’t impressed by anything she saw, and she found herself far more interested in Champagne Charlie’s *on dits* concerning people who matter in the green room than in the bottling and “fining” and capsuling of the wine.

“We must finish up this tour with a bottle of My Wine—The World’s one and only Wine,” said the smart cicerone in the brown suit as Elsa tried to shew an enthusiasm which she didn’t feel.

“Oh ! don’t lead me astray,” she answered a little unsteadily—for though she had proved her inability to drink alcoholic stimulant she didn’t know what might happen when once again she had been subjected to the ordeal of smelling its condensed fumes. Then with a sudden sense of desperation she turned to Vickers, and added : “Is that

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huge vat empty to-day?—‘Big Bertie’ you called it, I think.”

“That’s strange, Mrs. Johnson-Carr, because it was drained out only yesterday. Of course when you were here last time it was empty, wasn’t it? Of course, yes, I remember. Very strange it should just come the same this time.”

“Yes, it is strange. I should like to see it again, and I—I should like to smell inside it again!”

Vickers appeared much gratified for, to him, people not interested in wines and everything connected with wines were hardly worth any sort of consideration. Yet in all London there couldn’t be a more sober man than the foreman in charge of Carmen and Hoyce’s cellars—it was all a matter of business interest and enthusiasm which he would have expended just as lavishly on black lead or soft soap had his daily work been connected with these uninspiring domestic commodities instead of with the gold and red and sparkle of “fermented grape juice.”

So now the test was coming! In a moment now she would know if Boy Bacchus would regain the convert whom Elwyn Brent had caused him to lose.

In a way she dreaded the experiment, yet she didn’t feel in the least excited about it. Such placidity and lack of interest were curiously restful.

“Now, Mrs. Johnson-Carr, here is Big Bertie ready and waiting to be inspected!” Vickers’ voice came suddenly and pierced through a whole haze of languid reflections.

And there was the same giant vat which had been responsible for so much that had happened during the past many weeks. It was bulging and brown as before and very beautifully carved, yet somehow on this occasion it didn’t appear particularly impressive.

Elsa couldn’t help thinking that any ordinary big beer barrel being lowered into a public house cellar would be just as effective!

“You are going to inhale the big chap’s perfumed breath, aren’t you?” asked Champagne Charlie.

“Yes, oh! yes—I’ve done it before, but I am going to do it again,” was Elsa’s rather forcedly resolute response,

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made just as Vickers summoned a cellarman to pull up the shutter covering the manhole.

"Now, Mrs. Johnson-Carr, are you ready?"

Elsa assured the foreman she was quite ready; whereat Champagne Charlie gallantly and deftly hoisted her up on to the stool which had been placed in position. Then she thrust her head into the dangerous atmosphere created by the breath of Boy Bacchus.

"Ah!"

It was almost a groan of anguished nausea which she uttered and the next second she had withdrawn her head before falling backward and almost fainting in Vickers' outstretched arms.

She was sick—sick—horribly and over-poweringly sick! *Grace à dieu*, she was sick!!

* * * * *

A couple of hours later Elsa was back at Burlford Grange, secure in the certainty that as she had always been so she now was again.

Alcoholic stimulant in any form whatever—taste or smell—was abhorrent as it had been all her life, and now she had gone back to where she started from before trying to find some way of dulling the maddening acute clearness of her mental vision.

And how would it be with her now?—now that Boy Bacchus could no longer be summoned to cast a veil of rosy illusion over everything and everybody?

All should be well and ought to be well and would be well if only when in four days' time (he was due in four days) Edward Arkenson came back he need not be told that the woman he loved and wanted to marry was a reformed drunkard.

At first it had seemed to Elsa that all might be well if it were made definitely sure that the god of Green Grapes no longer held her in any kind of thrall.

But now she realised suddenly that an ordeal was still confronting her—the ordeal of telling Edward Arkenson that, but for the marvellous powers of a doctor who gave treatment by means of hypnotic suggestion, she would

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now be well on the way towards becoming a hopeless inebriate !

Now she came to think of it, there was no more horrible confession which anyone could be called upon to make, and not one more likely to turn a man's ardour and devotion into loathing and disgust.

A woman may be mercenary, unfaithful, a liar, a thief, a would-be murderess, and still keep the love of her lover ; but it is very rarely that a female drunkard can look for any end other than loneliness and desertion.

Yet Edward must be told ! Of course, it could be kept from him, but the secret would be a soul-deadening one, and—and—no, no, however cowardly might be her inclinations, her methods of dealing with those inclinations should be brave !

Edward Arkenson should be told, and if—as probably would be the case—ardent passion should turn to disgust, Boy Bacchus would not be too proud to take back into his vineyard a deserter who had escaped !

* * * * *

Elsa wrote a letter and addressed it to Edward Arkenson at his flat. He would find it on coming back to town.

" I am writing to say that when you call to see me at the expiration of three weeks as arranged, do not go to West Passage. Come instead to Burlford Grange, Stoking Common, and ask for ' Mrs. Johnson-Carr.' That is my real name, and Burlford Grange is my real home. I dropped the ' Carr ' and took the suite in Gray's Inn for the purpose of trying to find a second and *sub rosa* life more satisfactory than the ordinary routine of my normal existence. It is quite true that I am a widow and it is quite true that I am in love with you, but I am a woman with an ugly secret, and whether or no I shall be brave enough to confess that secret, or how you will receive that confession when it is made, waits to be proved.

" Anyway, I shall expect you here at four o'clock on Thursday, which, according to the last arrangement we made, should be the day of our next meeting.

" ELSA."

That was the letter written ; now there was another to be dashed off.

" Burlford Grange, Stoking Common.

Dear Fourth Floor Friend,

" Just a line to say that except when I come to tea or dinner with you (and I insist upon being asked !) West Passage won't

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see me any more. I am giving up my dual life and returning to the normal and more or less satisfactory one which I live at the above address. My name is 'Johnson-Carr' instead of undecorated 'Johnson,' I am a widow, my record is a very respectable one, and when I see you I'll explain exactly why I paid those flying visits to West Passage and why—as I told you I intended to do—I took to drink as a hobby. I hope you will be sympathetic, and I am inclined to think you will.

"What the future will give me I don't know, and quite frankly I admit that it depends upon how Edward Arkenson takes the confession which I shall make when he comes here next Thursday afternoon. If he will marry me after he has heard what I have got to tell, then I will marry him. This may sound humiliating, but it's true and frank—and whatever offences I may commit, or whatever objectionable traits may decorate my disposition, I can never pretend anything. As I have always had the misfortune of seeing through other people, so I see through my own ignoble and unsatisfactory self, and what I see I cannot hide.

"I am just in the position of waiting to see if a man wants me or doesn't want me—if he will take me or not take me!

"If he wants me and will take me, I go to him—yes, I go to him because I love him!

"So, Tim, dear friend, that's that!

"And now please will you show that you have no intention of dropping me (if such is the case) by writing or 'phoning to say what evening next week you will dine here with me and sparkle up my mind with that whimsical brilliance which I insist shall give me at Stoking Common some of the delectable mental food with which it provided me at Gray's Inn?

"I shall wait very anxiously to hear from you.

"Yours ever, as during the past weeks of comradeship at Gray's Inn—

"ELSA JOHNSON-CARR."

And now should another letter be written—a letter to Annock Bee?

Elsa dipped her pen into the ink and almost began to write, then something stopped her. She felt that to-day was not the day for writing to the unknown Poet-Philosopher who for so many weeks past had been her one confidant, the sole recipient of all those egoistical outpourings of the soul, which, to a certain woman with a certain tiresome order of temperament, must be expatiated upon to be enjoyed.

No, Annock Bee should not be inflicted to-day—probably not until after next Thursday had come and gone.

So, instead of writing another letter, Elsa took out her

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violin and tried to "let herself go" on the strings. But for the first time in her life she played like a painstaking young lady student from some local academy of music.

Neither the G nor D strings would be raucous and wild, the A string wouldn't speak of sweet tenderness such as is the need of a lonely soul, and not a single wail of stifled longing made itself heard on the E string!

Elsa's playing had been called "melodramatic," "coarse," "immoral" even, but to-day—well, to-day it was almost—well, almost "very nice indeed"!

If she didn't take care she would find herself playing "*Simple Aveu*"—and playing it with "correctness and taste"!

And in such circumstances naturally the only thing was to put away the fiddle as quickly as possible.

This was the first time that two silver and two catgut strings had failed her!

Heaven alone could tell who and what would fail her next!

CHAPTER XXXI

TO DO WITH LOVE

AT a quarter to four on the following Thursday afternoon Elsa stood before the longest glass in her inartistically gay boudoir..

She was wondering exactly what impression she would make upon Edward Arkenson and if the undoubtedly satisfactory result produced by making a careful toilet would have any effect in helping to gloss over an ugly confession.

Hitherto Edward had seen her either costumed or ordinarily frocked or loosely covered by a quite non-mysterious sort of wrapper.

But to-day there was muslin over lace and something else under that and a touch of elusive colour where it would be least expected.

She looked more femininely attractive than, so far,

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Edward had ever seen her look, and that might count for something when it came to destroying every illusion he had ever cherished concerning her.

She was going to tell him, to tell the person whose good opinion she valued more than that of any one in the whole world, that she had only just recovered from being a drunkard, and that had she gone on drinking she would in all probability have become a dipsomaniac.

This was what she had got to tell—to *tell*—to put into words—to speak with her own lips!

And as Elsa more and more forcibly made herself realise the task which lay before her, she was seized by a sense of panic far more intense than the occasion warranted.

Her knees shook, her lips grew hot and her feet and hands grew cold, while every breath she took seemed as though it must end in suffocation.

The cowardice of it all was pitiful, but when a woman who has never known happiness sees it put just within her grasp and realises that she has got to do something which, most probably, will mean the withdrawal of all chance of retaining that happiness, there is a certain amount of excuse to be made for her—or anyhow there is no reason why she shouldn't make excuses for herself!

Drink! Such a very, very horrible vice—drink!

A selfish vice, not leaving a loophole for suggesting that it would help to bring happiness or pleasure or prosperity to anyone else! A vulgarly greedy vice—just as vulgarly greedy as the vice of the gutter child who steals jam because taste gives pleasure to its palate! A weak-minded vice, shewing lack of will-power and self-control! An unintelligent and stupid vice, not succumbed to on the pretence that it might prove useful or even amusing! A bestial vice, giving foul odour to the breath, roughness to the skin, watery redness to the eyes and puffiness to the features! An unromantic vice, not decorated by one touch of drama or daring! A cowardly vice—a dirty vice—a silly vice—a grotesque vice—a thoroughly useless and contemptible vice!

And this was the vice which Elsa must confess to—

Ah! a ring at the bell! The time had come! Now it

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seemed quite easy to understand the sensations experienced by condemned criminals on the morning of their execution ! And there would be no reprieve—the door was answered—he was being shewn into the drawing-room—he was asked to sit down—very probably he wouldn't sit down—

“ Mr. Arkenson to see you, madam. He is in the drawing-room.”

It was Barnstable who spoke, and as Elsa answered she felt as though the shaking of her knees had got up into her voice.

“ Very well, Barnstable, I'll go in.”

Barnstable departed and she followed him almost immediately—because to give herself time for reflection might bring about absolutely annihilating results.

So Elsa left the gaudy boudoir and for the first time went down to receive her lover in the attractive guise of mistress of her own house.

When she went in he was standing by the mantelpiece—and then she knew she had made sure he would be standing by the mantelpiece.

Grey tweed clothes suited him extraordinarily well—so did a blue collar that matched his eyes ! He looked so full of life that it seemed impossible to realise he might ever be dead.

“ Well, darling, I am not in the least disconcerted to find you the affluent owner of an imposing house, because I may tell you without any delay that I have a large estate in the North and am considerably richer than you are ! So no one will say that I am marrying a wealthy widow for the sake of her money as well as her personal attractions ! Darling !—*darling !* ”

This was his characteristic greeting and Elsa felt her heart suddenly flooded by a wave of absolutely school-girlish happiness. This man made her feel so extraordinarily young.

Then she remembered her ordeal—remembered it just in time to keep herself out of his arms.

“ You mustn't come *at all* near me until I have told you the ugly secret which I wrote to you about ! ” she said making a fence of her hands.

Green Grapes

" Mayn't I kiss you first and have some tea ? "

" You may not. Probably you won't want to when you've heard—kiss me, I mean, not have tea ! It's such an ugly sombre secret that I think I'll tell you in my own gay and gaudy den. Anything bad never seems so bad in there—it is such a ridiculous room ! Come along—I can tell you more easily there ! "

He bowed in acquiescence and followed her.

" Now ! " This was when they reached the boudoir and Elsa had shut the door. " Now, I'll begin at once ! "

" Do you dread telling me ? " Edward put the question suddenly and seriously and took both her hands. It was no good for her to remonstrate—he just took them.

" I dread it *intensely* ! "

" Then don't do it—I'll tell *you* instead ! "

" What do you mean by you'll tell me ? "

" I mean, dearest love, that I'll tell you how you used to be an abstainer, and because you were too clever a woman to be unoccupied and not in love, you forced yourself to drink—"

" Edward ! "

" —yes, *forced* your dear teetotal self to drink wine and spirits, which at first you loathed. Then you left off loathing and went on industriously until a sort of spurious craving set in and you experienced a morbid and gloomy satisfaction in regarding yourself as a confirmed drunkard. And so you were, because you drank most horribly and persistently until Elwyn Brent came along and impelled you round to see him and then put your mind and will and reasoning powers back to where they had been before. He has cured you—not a very great triumph when it was only a matter of undoing what an eccentric freak had caused you to do, still quite useful in putting things right for my wife and the mother of my future children ! "

" But, Edward, how do you—how *can* you know ? "

" In a cottage on the shores of a Cumberland lake lives a crippled student and poet. We have been friends since boyhood, and ever since he was laid low and his eyesight began to fail I have taken as much time as I could spare to be with him. Practically every week-end I have run

Green Grapes

up there, and when there I read him any correspondence which he may have received during the week—”

“Ah!”

“I read to him the first letter which was sent by ‘Elsa Johnson’ in appreciation of his verses, and since then I have read to him every letter she has written, so what was confided to ‘Annock Bee’ was also confided to me. What he knows, I know! And after reading that first letter I was seized by a wild desire to know the writer herself, so I—er—well, I set to work in the way you may remember. And when the lady demanded a conventional introduction I finessed and engineered until I got to know Haven—also as you may remember. And then I fell in love with the lady, and now I am going to marry her!”

“You—you really still want to marry me now you know wh—what I have so dreaded confessing?”

“Try me, darling, and see!” This was said boyishly and light-heartedly, but there was desperate seriousness in his eyes. For once the laughter seemed to have gone out of them—but there was something better in its stead.

“Edward!” Elsa spoke with a sort of gasp, for an idea had suddenly come to her. “Edward, did you arrange—had you anything to do with my meeting Dr. Brent?”

“Yes, dear, everything to do with it. I told Brent (who was at Cambridge with me) the whole story, then asked Haven to arrange the meeting. With the characteristic discretion and lack of curiosity which ought to put him in the peerage, he did all I asked, and the result has been exactly what I felt sure it would be. Now you know everything—even where and how my week-ends have been spent!”

“What does your friend, Annock Bee, say about it all?”

“He says that two people who love each other—you can’t deny that you love me, darling, because you’ve written it and I’ve read it!—yes, that two people who for the sole and simple reason that they *do* love each other, ought not to lose another hour of life in being apart. He is waiting for us to spend our honeymoon days on the border of the lake—near him. You won’t keep him waiting long, will you, dearie?”

Green Grapes

"No, I—I—but there is Clare—my companion—one of those dear people who never do anything wrong themselves, but love other people who do. I can't part with Clare!"

"Why should you? Claber Hall—my place in Westmoreland—and any town house which you may select should be large enough for Clare. She can do for you what she has always done until such time as she follows your example and marries a thoroughly respectable and worthy person like myself. That disposes of Clare. What next?"

"And what about this house?"

"Sell it—give it—"

"No, I won't do that. I will—*Edward*! how about a private institution where Dr. Brent could attend brainy and artistic, but hopelessly hard-up, people, who have got into the clutches of Boy Bacchus? It would give me intense satisfaction to do that!"

"Well, naturally, that settles it—it will be done. You must tone this room down a bit, mustn't you, or else the poor devils will be driven to what they've come to get rid of!"

And that, of course, was "cheek"—"cheek," just at the moment when it was wanted to put sombre things aside and set the love-making going.

And so it was that Elsa Johnson-Carr left off probing and analysing things which were not helped by being probed and analysed, and gave up the uncomfortable habit of looking for trouble when, quite probably, trouble didn't exist.

There was really no reason now why she shouldn't accept any inevitable which came her way, because loving, being loved, and consequently being happy would put quite a different complexion on the world and all that happened in it!

* * * * *

The god stamped, the god writhed, the god fumed.

It's true that he had only lost one among many, but one counts when any day there may come a halcyon time when the many will go the way of the one.

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